

Creating a Happy Family Culture Based on Everyone's Strengths (and shrugging off everyone's weaknesses)

[Special: Only for All MoxieTopics Subscribers]

Assumption: You want to create a positive, happy family culture that's unique to your family because of the specific people in it. You want a culture that's based on respect and appreciation for everyone, and a celebration of who each person is. Your home and family is a safe space for everyone to be who they are, to try and not be penalized for taking chances.

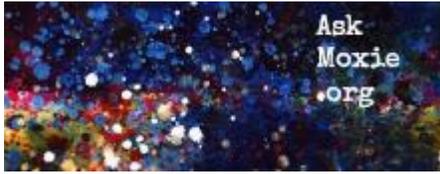
Businesses that care about both performance and culture focus on their employees' strengths and don't spend resources on their employees' weaknesses.

Your family isn't a business (unless you're the Partridge Family or the Kardashians), but you can use the same forward-focus businesses use to create a unique, positive culture that supports everyone as they become better at being who they are.

It used to be common for companies to hire employees, give them assessments to determine their particular skills and weaknesses, and then spend time and money to improve employees' weaknesses to get them up to a "normal" level. As management and leadership developed as disciplines, researchers realized that this made little sense, and was not helping the employees or the companies in any proportional way to the amount of time and money being spent. Companies had been assuming that every person in the organization needed to be competent in all areas, but had ignored their strengths. In essence, they were spending lots of money, time, and effort to create companies full of mediocre people.

Organizational leaders decided to start focusing on people's skills and strengths, and invest time and energy and money making people who were good at things even better. Instead of putting employees into a job function and then trying to train them into being good at the things required in that job, they'd hire people for job functions that already had the skills for that job and would then invest in helping them become even better at those things. It didn't matter if you were bad at calculating balance sheets as long as you were good at managing client relationships, because someone else who was bad at dealing with clients but good at balance sheets would be working on the balance sheets. And you'd be working with the clients.

In business, everything is about calculating return on investment (ROI): Did I get back enough value for the money I spent doing this thing? There's little ROI on spending any money at all to make people mediocre. There's a ton of ROI on spending money to make



people really, really excellent. Especially if your people get so excellent at what they're naturally good at that your company becomes an unstoppable team of people all doing what they're best at.

You can make your family an unstoppable team, too. By creating a family culture based on the things each of you is good at and enjoys, and not worrying about the things you "should be" doing or enjoying, you'll enjoy family life more and will be a tighter group. Here are some steps to enabling everyone in your family to be who they are, and celebrating that.

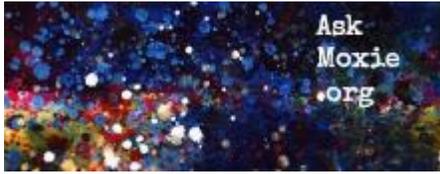
Give yourself permission to be yourself. This seems so simple, and yet it becomes complicated once we become parents. Some of us aren't really ok with who we are to begin with, and becoming a parent complicates that. Even those of us who feel like we really have a handle on who we are and are happy with ourselves can be thrown for a loop by parenthood and the layers of cultural expectation that come with that.

The truth is that children don't thrive with a generic, ideal parent. Children thrive with their own, specific parent(s). Your children will be most secure, most fulfilled, most free when you are yourself with them. Not an ideal parent, but you, yourself.

If you haven't spent time getting to know and accept yourself, including accepting the not-so-pretty truths about yourself, please give yourself the time and space to work on it. Coming to terms with who you are will pay dividends for you and your kids and their kids.

Choose your parenting influences very carefully. If you're reading books telling you that there's only one way to parent your baby, you're setting a trap for yourself! There's very little chance that your child's temperament and personality will align with the book, even if yours does. And if things don't go exactly as the book says they should you'll waste time thinking you're not doing something correctly (or that there's something wrong with your baby). Why introduce doubt into your relationship when both of you are fantastic just as you are, and are perfect for each other?

The influences that will help you develop as a parent are those that help you analyze yourself, your kids, and your family, and give you tools to parent based on the analysis you make of your situation. Anything that tells you you have to follow one specific method isn't going to help you develop your own skills. Since the whole goal of parenting is to develop a trusting relationship with your child so you can help them become who they're supposed to be, choose influences and tools that support that unique relationship.



Don't compare yourself to other parents, and don't compare your kids to other kids. There's always going to be one parent who likes to spend hours on the floor playing with Legos and another that doesn't, one kid who's talking in complete sentences and another who only has a few words by 18 months, one baby that sleeps eight hours in a row from the start and another that wakes several times a night until age 3. It's all in the range of normal, and none of it means that anyone is better than anyone else.

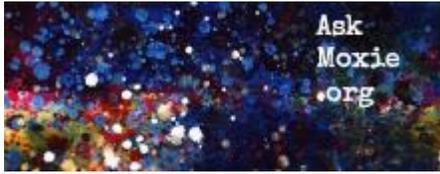
If you fall into the comparison trap, either about your kids or about yourself vs. other parents, you create a hierarchy in your mind. And that means that you'll privilege some skills and interests over others, so you won't be able to celebrate your kids and their interests and talents freely. And you'll be worried about how you measure up against other parents. Instead of worrying about where everyone falls in a hierarchy, celebrate each person's accomplishments as they make them, and don't worry about other families.

Encourage everyone's interests without owning them. As your kids grow through the toddler and preschooler years, their individual interests will emerge. Provide access to encourage your child's interests, but know that kids like to explore a lot of things. What they're passionate about at the age of 4, they may or may not still be interested in at age 7. And make sure that your encouragement of your child's interests still allows the child to have those interests, and doesn't devolve into you taking ownership of the interest.

It's absolutely fascinating to watch your child sort through all the possibilities and settle on things they're interested in, and explore the intersections of those interests with their skills as they develop. If you can step back and observe and help facilitate the exploration and the interests without interfering or pushing toward your own interests, your kids will be able to go deeply into what they're passionate about.

Teach coping skills and ways to compensate. Everyone's going to be weak in some areas. It's just how we're built. If your kids are weaker in areas they are likely to need in daily life (such as arithmetic or running quickly) as opposed to things that they will probably never be called on to do (such as archery or composing blank verse), they'll need to achieve a basic level of competence or figure out ways to compensate for their weakness or cope with it.

This isn't about forcing interest in something they're not interested in, or a drive to succeed in all areas. It's about achieving enough competence to get by and to do what



they need to do. And then letting go, and accepting that this isn't their life's work but something else is.

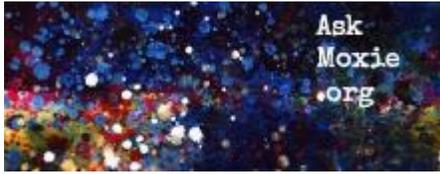
Sometimes it's just putting in hard work (like memorizing multiplication facts or practicing sprints). Sometimes it's a matter of apprenticing or mentoring so they can become familiar enough with the skill to feel comfortable with it, even if they're not great at it. It may take finding a buddy to work with who can do the things you're weak at (if you're not being asked to work individually). Helping your kids figure out strategies to work around the things they aren't great at while spending more time developing the skills they're better at is better use of everyone's time and energy.

Celebrate effort and celebrate achievement. You already know to celebrate effort, because that encourages your kids to keep working hard, and to keep going while they're working on something, even if they haven't gotten it yet. Make sure that you celebrate achievement, too, and that you don't downplay achievement because you're trying so hard to encourage effort. When kids work hard to achieve something in their area of interest, they feel really good. You don't have to go over the top with celebrating their achievements--you don't want to overshadow the achievement with the celebration, or sound like you're praising falsely--but knowing that your family appreciates your achievement is a big deal to kids (and adults).

Avoid labels. Labels are tempting, because it seems like another way to praise your kid. "She's our runner," or "He's the one with the art talent in the family." But those labels can limit, by making kids feel like they have to live up to the labels (what if she wants to try swimming and give running a rest?) or by making kids feel like they'll never measure up to a sibling so they shouldn't even try.

You can talk about the great things your kids do without using labels by talking about your kid's actions. "She trained for months, and then on race day gave it everything she had and won the state championship. We're so proud of her." "I love the way he uses light and shading in his pen-and-ink drawings." This lets kids know you appreciate what they did without putting them in a box.

Make it an experiment. As adults, we're often used to thinking in terms of success or failure. This can set kids up to be afraid to try, however. If they aren't absolutely sure they can do something successfully, they might be afraid to do it at all because they don't want to fail. This then creates a vicious circle because they'll only do things they're good at, and because they only spend time working on those things, they won't practice anything else. The gap between things they succeed at and things they fail at gets bigger.



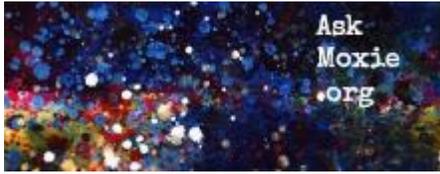
To stop this cycle and help your kids (and yourself) be unafraid of trying new things, think of everything as an experiment. Instead of succeeding or failing, you're collecting data on what gets you the result you want and what doesn't. If something doesn't work the way you thought it would, what can you learn from that? What worked, and what didn't work? Can you adjust to do things differently the next time? Do you have to do everything differently, or should you keep some things and change others?

By making everything an opportunity to gather information, you set up the situation so that your child isn't failing, even when things go horribly wrong. Even when the situation doesn't work out at all, your child hasn't failed--you've all just learned more information about what not to do, and therefore what to try differently the next time. Kids who aren't afraid to fail are kids who aren't afraid to try things they haven't tried before.

Try new things. Setting the example of trying new things will encourage your kids to try new things, too. Since you're approaching everything as an experiment, there's no reason to be afraid of trying new things, and it's fun to do things together that you might not have thought of doing. You might discover things that you love but wouldn't have known about had you stuck with things you already knew you liked. Just be careful that you aren't so invested in trying new things just for the sake of trying new things that you don't allow everyone to settle in and go deep into the things they already know they like. Trying new things should be fun, not a self-improvement project.

Learn enough to understand. Your family members may develop strong interests in things you don't care about or know nothing about. It's a gift to your kids and partner to learn enough about their interest that you can converse about it with them at a basic level and can understand when they do something important or impressive. You certainly don't have to get into it--and you don't want to take over instead of letting it be their interest--but part of the fun of getting really into something is being able to show and talk about how engaged you are with other people. So learning enough about it to acknowledge your child's interest knowledgably is great encouragement for them.

Encourage each other. Develop the habit of encouraging each other and being proud of each other. Instead of letting siblings compete against each other, set expectations and model being proud of their siblings' (and parents'!) efforts and achievements while being proud of their own efforts and achievements at the same time. Expect kids to make an effort to be supportive of others, whether what they're doing is something they also enjoy or something they don't care about. ("I have no idea what Level 9 is but I'm proud of you!") Focus on how family members feel about their skills and interests, and make it a practice to support each other and be each other's biggest fans.



Find common interests. There are going to be things that you all enjoy doing, even if that's as simple as movie night once a week. Put time and effort into developing common interests, so you have a balance between things you all like to do together and supporting each other through your individual interests. This balance will strengthen your bond by making each person a strong individual part of a strong group.

When you provide safe space for each person in your family to enjoy what they enjoy and be who they are (without feeling guilt or shame about the things they don't do well), you create the conditions for a bonded family that enjoys being together without the pressure of competition or conformity. Holding on loosely creates a stronger bond. Putting in the time and effort to support all family members in becoming even better at what they like to do strengthens the whole family.