



the happy family playbook

What would bring true happiness to your household? A winning lottery ticket? A vacation home on a faraway beach? A new minivan free of pretzel crumbs? In fact, a growing body of research suggests that lasting family happiness isn't about momentous events or acquiring more things. **It's about learning to savor life's small pleasures ... together.**

We often speak of “finding” happiness—as if it's something we stumble upon, a lucky penny on the sidewalk of life. Actually, it's an emotion over which we have a fair amount of control. Science is confirming what Dorothy had to go to Oz to discover: Happiness is not somewhere over the rainbow. It's right in your own backyard.

In the pages that follow, our experts share the latest research into the mystery of positive vibes, plus easy ways of putting these findings into action every day, from laughing more to plugging

in less. The great news is that introducing your kids to happiness habits is a package deal. “It's buy one, get one free. You can't teach these habits without getting happier yourself,” says Christine Carter, PhD, author of *Raising Happiness: 10 Simple Steps for More Joyful Kids and Happier Parents* and a senior fellow at UC Berkeley's Greater Good Science Center. When you all work on it together, “positive emotions are amplified, and the benefits are stronger.”

In the process, you'll build strong bonds, which adds to the bliss: “Having close family

relationships is a key predictor of overall happiness,” says Jeffrey Froh, PsyD, a Hofstra University psychology professor and coauthor of *Making Grateful Kids: The Science of Building Character*.

At first, you may have to take the lead. But then watch some magic happen. “Kids want to do these things, not because they are Pollyannas, but because it feels so good to them,” contends Carter. So are you ready to get happy? Read on for seven proven strategies (and many more tips and activities) for raising upbeat kids and increasing family joy.

By Jennifer King Lindley | Photographs by Priscilla Gragg | Illustrations by Josie Portillo



Practicing some simple habits can boost happiness levels in your home.

1 commit acts of kindness

When you and your children pitch in to make a get-well card for Uncle Gary, you know you're making a difference in the life of someone who needs a lift. But showing kindness to others is also an effective way to get happier yourselves. Researchers call the warm glow we feel after doing something nice a "helper's high." And these good feelings start early. In a Canadian experiment, toddlers who gave their snacks to others were rated as happier than those who ate the treats themselves. In another study, **kids ages 9 to 11 who did three kind things each week for a month (such as picking up litter or helping a sibling with homework) enjoyed greater feelings of happiness and more popularity at school**, notes Sonja Lyubomirsky, PhD, author of *The How of Happiness* and a professor of psychology at the University of California, Riverside.

To get the biggest feel-good bang out of helping others, consider Lyubomirsky's intriguing finding: "My studies revealed that practicing three to five acts of kindness per week may be ideal. If you do them all in one day it's especially powerful." This may be because same-day deeds don't get so lost in daily routine. So go ahead: devote some family time to not-so-random acts of caring. Doesn't that sound like a lot more fun than doing chores anyway?

MAKE HAPPY HAPPEN

1 | Declare a weekly Three Good Deeds Day. Challenge each family member to chalk up a trio of thoughtful acts, then report back at dinnertime. To chart how much kindness your family can spread (good karma in the bank!), get our [printable Good Deeds Tracker](#) to hang on your fridge.

2 | Keep a kindness fund. Donate together to a favorite charity. The bonus payoff: feeling happier than if you had treated yourself. (In a 2007 study, when researchers gave subjects \$5 cash, those who spent it for the good of others reported just that result.) To make it fun, tag a jar with our [printable Kindness Fund label](#), set it in a central spot, and be sure deposits are greeted with hearty cheers.



VOLUNTEER TOGETHER

Boost the feel-good benefit from altruism by donating time as a family. These sites can connect you with organizations and ideas that let the whole gang pitch in:

doinggoodtogether.org

This site shares a slew of creative charitable projects, with step-by-step directions, from baking biscuits for shelter dogs to cleaning up trash in your local park.

generationon.org

The organization is all about getting kids excited to help out in their communities, with suggestions by age and interest.

volunteermatch.org

Type in a zip code to find nearby family-friendly opportunities or long-distance ways to assist, such as sending care packages to U.S. troops.

PRINTABLES →



A HAPPY GENE?

It's true: some of us are just happier by nature. That's why one family may have a glum Eeyore and a bouncing Tigger sitting at the same dinner table. But while genetics account for about 40 percent of our feelings of well-being, according to Sonja Lyubomirsky, the rest is a combination of our life circumstances and our behavior. That suggests it's often within a family's power to improve the overall household mood. "Happiness is best thought of not as an inborn trait," says Christine Carter, "but as a set of skills that can be taught."

THE WISH LIST...

We asked kids: What would you wish for to make your family happier?



FROM FAMILYFUN'S HAPPINESS SURVEY OF NEARLY 300 FAMILIES. SEE MORE ON PAGES 76 AND 77.



Doing a good deed is a win-win. It helps others and adds to the deed-doer's happiness.

2 lol—a lot

Yes, laughter is the best medicine, and it appears to work best if you're diligent about getting your daily dose. So what do you do if your home isn't exactly Comedy Central? Easy! Gather the clan around the goofy cat videos and indulge in a quick and guilt-free silly session. Even if we have to resort to clips of Grumpy Cat to provoke a chortle, we still get a genuine "squirt of dopamine"—one of the main brain chemicals associated with happiness and pleasure, says Scott Weems, PhD, a cognitive neuroscientist at the University of Maryland and the author of *Ha! The Science of When We Laugh and Why*. It doesn't much matter what we're laughing about, as long as we're doing it.

And these good feelings multiply when we giggle together. One study found you're 30 times more likely to laugh when you're around others than you are when you're by yourself. The closer the relationship, the more intense the effect, notes Weems. In fact, he says, **we should think of laughter as the Krazy Glue of a close family.** The takeaway? To get happy, get intentional about getting regular guffaws, and make sure your loved ones are getting theirs, too.

MAKE HAPPY HAPPEN

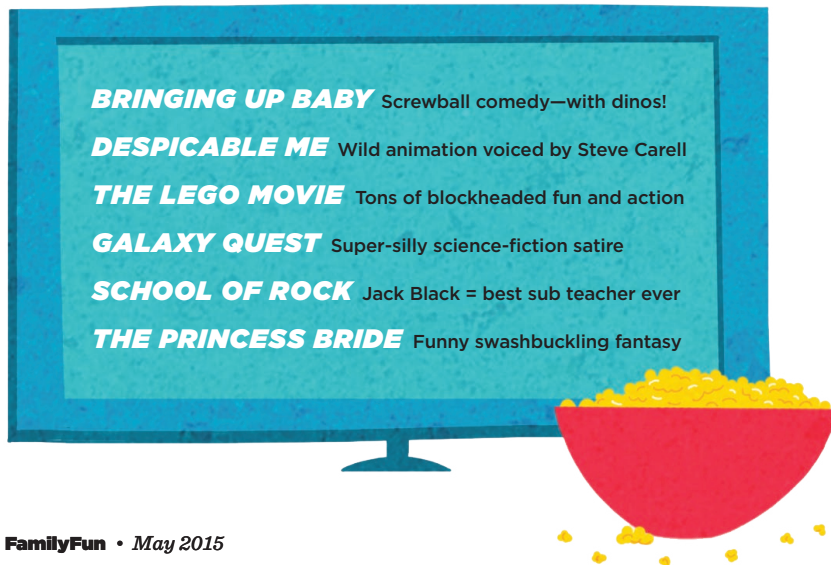
1 | Share good jokes. Along with the cookbooks, keep a few humor compendiums in the kitchen. Two can't-miss titles: *Ten-Second Tongue Twisters*, by Mike Artell (ages 6 to 9, barnesandnoble.com) and *Laugh-Out-Loud Jokes for Kids*, by Rob Elliott (ages 6 to 12, amazon.com).

2 | Encourage clowning. Schedule **An Evening of Ridiculous Parlor Games** once a month. Try a funny walk contest, a silly version of Simon says ("Simon says cluck like a chicken"), or a fictional dance-off ("Daffy Duck versus the Hulk. Go!").

3 | Troll online. Bookmark links to hilarious kid-friendly videos for impromptu viewings when real-life laughs are in short supply. Find animal clips at cuteoverload.com or give your kids a screen-time assignment to search for the most comical videos on **The Muppets' YouTube channel**. Easiest way to save links: click the "Watch Later" icon, found on the lower frame of YouTube offerings.

THE FAMILYFUN FUNNY FILM FESTIVAL

Forget Cannes. We consider these flicks true masterworks because even after countless viewings, they still make our families snort into their popcorn.



YOGA FOR YUCKS

A new twist on an age-old discipline, laughter yoga combines breathing techniques with playful exercises designed to relieve stress and induce chuckling. Laughter is "a release valve for pent-up emotions and tensions," says Jennifer Lennon, a Boulder, Colorado, yoga instructor. As a bonus, a good laugh has been shown to be a great cardiovascular workout.

Try some of Lennon's family-friendly suggestions to get your own gang giggling. Don't worry if as a grown-up you feel a little silly at first. "Start by getting pleasure from your kid's enjoyment," says Lennon. "Just smiling and making eye contact doing these moves helps create an emotionally enriching connection." Pretty soon you'll likely be ha-ha-ing, too.

THE DANCING NOODLE

Pretend you're an uncooked spaghetti strand thrown into a pot of boiling water. Slowly get floppy and relaxed as you bounce around in the bubbling water and start to cook.

THE HELLO HUG

Stand some distance from a family member. Now run toward each other but miss a few times. Finally, meet and hug. A giggly reunion is pretty much guaranteed!

THE AIR TICKLE

Lie on the ground while the others pretend to tickle you—no actual touching allowed. Seeing people wiggle fingers near ticklish places is usually enough to get laughs rolling.



Get serious about getting goofy.
Laughing can bring families closer.

3 jump for joy

Talk about happy feet! How you and your family members hold yourselves and move can actually affect your household vibe. A recent study at the University of Michigan found that subjects who performed movements associated with joy—jumping, skipping, holding their shoulders open wide, standing tall, and being light on their feet—experienced a boost in mood. “Our body is constantly sending signals to our brain that affect our feelings,” says Tal Shafir, PhD, a specialist in dance movement therapy and neuroscience who worked on the study. And Shafir herself walks the walk (or skips the skip): “I love skipping and galloping and sometimes do them in the middle of a jogging session. Adults usually feel uncomfortable skipping, but they can do it with their kids.” Moving in this fleet-footed fashion has been shown to make grown-ups feel as happy and free-spirited as children, she says.

Kristen Race, PhD, a psychologist and author of *Mindful Parenting*, encourages her family to get happy with a different kind of move. They kick off their shoes and groove. “Dancing reduces stress hormones,” explains Race. To make it extra fun, “we all take turns choosing songs.” They glide across the floor and get silly with their steps, and pretty soon they are howling with laughter. (The other classic stress reliever that gets them wiggling around: tickle fights.)

MAKE HAPPY HAPPEN

1 | Turn it into a race.

Hold a backyard skipping and hopping competition by placing pool noodles, garden hoses, and other low obstacles across the yard to be hopped over on one foot; the areas between them must be crossed by skipping. Anyone who runs is out.

2 | Try bouncy gear.

Stock up on playthings that encourage joyful jumping. A pair of pogo toys that our testers loved: the **Kidoozie Hop 'n Squeak Unicorn Pogo Jumper**, \$19.95, intplay.com, and the **Go-Go-Pogo**, \$59.99, amazon.com.



An instant happiness lift could be just a hop, skip, and a jump away.

GLEE FUEL

There are no instant edible cures for the blues. But not surprisingly, scientists have found that maintaining a healthy diet with key nutrients can improve your emotional well-being. “Studies have demonstrated there’s a decrease of between 30 and 50 percent in depression when people eat a more whole food-based diet,” says Dr. Drew Ramsey, author of *The Happiness Diet*. For a family meal plan that’s rich in feel-good ingredients, focus on foods with the nutrients below.



OMEGA 3'S

anchovies
rainbow trout
salmon
sardines



B-12

beef
cheese
clams
eggs
yogurt



B-9 (FOLATE)

broccoli
chickpeas
lentils
spinach



VITAMIN E

almonds
avocados
sunflower seeds
swiss chard



MAGNESIUM

bananas
brown rice
pumpkin seeds
quinoa



APP WE LOVE

Cranking music with a buoyant beat offers an easy way to get rear ends off sofas and spirits on the upswing. Compile and share your own playlists with **Spotify**, or browse the app’s “Mood” area to choose ready-made ones. And check out the “Kids” area, which offers fun playlists to fit common moments from “family road trip” to “bedtime stories.” **Free, iOS and Android**

4 unplug for a while

The families with the highest happiness quotients are those who feel truly connected to each other, say experts. They make time to focus on one another—listen to problems, share a much-needed hug. But there's growing concern that our gadget obsession may be fraying these all-important bonds IRL. In researching her book *The Big Disconnect: Protecting Childhood and Family Relationships in the Digital Age*, family therapist Catherine Steiner-Adair, EdD, interviewed more than 1,000 children and teenagers: "They talked about having to vie for their parents' attention with a screen. Kids recognize when we are disconnected from them." Her observations are borne out by a recent study in the journal *Pediatrics*. Almost three quarters of parents observed at Boston-area fast-food restaurants were reported to be using phones during the meal, and while they did, children often tried to get their attention.

No need to toss your iPhone, but do power down for regular screen-free time, especially during crucial moments like the morning rush. "You sound very different being interrupted when you're making eggs than when you're answering an e-mail from your boss," says Steiner-Adair. And keep reminding each other (adults and kids!): the key to happiness won't ever be found on that mesmerizing little screen.

MAKE HAPPY HAPPEN

- 1 | **Declare tech-free times.** The ride to and from school, for example, is a great chance to check the emotional weather or just daydream together. Ask some blue-sky questions: "If the car were a teleporter, where would we go?"
- 2 | **Park your devices.** To house mobile devices during dinner time, craft a "device parking garage." A large tissue box works well—choose one in a pretty design and tag it with our [printable Gadget Garage label](#).



To lighten the mood, pull the plug and connect with your kids.

Check out thefamilydinnerproject.org for more games and conversation starters.

THE DINNER DIVIDEND?

The more families dine together, the less they whine together. "The more often families eat together, the less likely kids are to do drugs, smoke, get depressed, and ditch school, and the more likely they are to get good grades, look people in the eye, learn big words, and say 'please' and 'thank you,'" notes Kristen Race. To fit family dinners into a hectic schedule—and make them count—try these tips.

BE FLEXIBLE ABOUT TIMING. "We shift dinner around so that everyone can be there," says Christine Carter. "Sometimes we eat at 5:30, sometimes 7:30. Even when dinner seems compromised (it's takeout again, we're in bad moods), we're actually reinforcing its importance. Among the chaos, there's consistency."

SHARE YOUR DAY. To get the most out of precious table time, Race's family plays "Rose, Bud, Thorn." Each person takes a turn describing her Rose (the best part of her day), Thorn (the worst part), and Bud (what she's looking forward to tomorrow). Turning sharing into a game may inspire kids to open up more.

MAKE DINNER A PRIORITY. "If I'm driving to Cub Scouts, then basketball, while wolfing down dinner, I'm not paying attention to anything. I'm just surviving," says Jeffrey Froh. To protect mealtime, he and his wife limit their kids to two extracurricular activities each.



HUES FOR GOOD MOODS

Can paint choices lift the household atmosphere? "No question, color has an enormous effect on our well-being," says Leatrice Eiseman, executive director of the Pantone Color Institute, the organization that advises retailers and designers on color trends. We asked about the best hues for a happy home.



play spaces: For an upbeat (but not-too-crazy) energy, consider cool brights, such as periwinkle or turquoise. Our pick: **Dream I Can Fly** by Benjamin Moore



kids' bedrooms: Look for golden or coral hues. "They are cheerful and engaging because they remind us of sunshine," says Eiseman. Our pick: **Pineapple Soda** by Behr Paints



kitchens: For a warm gathering spot, Eiseman likes red, rose, or orange shades, "or comfort-food yellow!" Our pick: **Gladiola** by Sherwin-Williams

5 get into gratitude

We know we should teach our kids to appreciate gifts; that's why the thank-you note to Nana always gets mailed promptly. But teaching them a more general attitude of gratitude can be a powerful bliss-booster as well. "The research shows that the relationship between gratitude and happiness is very, very strong," says Jeffrey Froh. In one classic study, **participants kept a journal for 10 weeks in which they noted five things they felt grateful for each day (a sunset, a call from a friend, the perfect ice cream cone).** The result: they felt **25 percent happier** at the study's end.

"Gratitude is about savoring the past, present, and also the future," Froh says. "It's squeezing the juice out of life and extracting all we can." A long while before a big Disney vacation, Froh and his wife, Cara, talked about it regularly with their two kids. They watched videos, looked at brochures, planned each day in advance together. "We were able to savor the anticipation for months." It's a great reminder: look for ways to make the most of the happiness that comes from good things, while they're happening—and before and after, too.

MAKE HAPPY HAPPEN

1 | Teach kids to stop and shoot the roses. When they encounter something special, say, a favorite pond on a hot day, encourage your children to take a "picture in their minds," suggests Christine Carter. Show them how to make a frame with their fingers to help capture the scene, then ask them how the picture makes them feel. "This will help them soak in the positive feelings," she says.

2 | Make an anticipation board for upcoming fun. Pin our printable **"Awesomeness Ahead" sign** to the top of a corkboard and put the board in a central spot. Post plans for outings, brochures from your next vacation spot, or the menu of a new fro-yo shop you're planning to visit.

3 | Hand out tokens of your esteem. Print out our tiny **thank-you tokens**. Have the kids hand them to a nice cashier at the grocery store, a sibling who shared her doll, or anyone else who's done them a kind turn.



APP WE LOVE

Get your crew thinking thankfully with the **Gratitude Journal**, where you can note the little (and big) things that make your life better. It also offers inspirational quotes to boost your motivation and mood. **\$1.99, iOS**



The nicest thing you can give your kids is a deep appreciation for what they already have.

WHAT QUIRKY THINGS MAKE YOU HAPPY?

FamilyFun Facebook fans and staffers reveal the little things that never fail to give their families a boost.

- pond swimming**
Leslie Charles
ASSOCIATE ART DIRECTOR
- nightlight shadow puppetry**
Tia Fowles
SPANISH FORK, UT
- morning ice cream**
Jessica Carlson
YUCCA VALLEY, CA
- stuffed-animal weddings**
Charlotte Meryman
CONTRIBUTOR
- the partridge family's christmas carol album**
Martha Jenkins
ART PRODUCTION COORDINATOR
- monkey bread**
Kristin Seiler
HOLLIDAYSBURG, PA
- living room picnics**
Karla Bolton
SOUTH RIVER, ON
- ok go videos**
Beth Honeyman
RESEARCH CHIEF
- silly string**
Katie Fils
WHEATON, IL

6 go play outside

If your family has ever piled into the car after a day at the beach, sun-kissed and blissful, this will come as no shock: new studies confirm that spending time outside is a powerful way to feel better. In one study, **even five minutes of what researchers call “green exercise”—physical activity in nature—was shown to boost mood and self-esteem in all age groups.** British researchers, using an app called Mappiness that allowed subjects to report their mood and location, found that people reported more positive feelings in natural environments than in urban areas.

According to Marti Erickson, PhD, a developmental psychologist and cofounder of the Children & Nature Network, exploring a park or trail is a particularly fine opportunity for the essential parent-child bonding known as “affective sharing”—oohing and aahing together over a novel sight or experience—because you’re free from the distractions of our hyper-stimulating world. So go ahead, take that ramble along the shore or stroll to the local green spot. It could be one simple path to happiness.

MAKE HAPPY HAPPEN

1 | **Set a get-outdoor goal together.** Visit every park in town (or every state park in your state!), explore a new outside activity each season (kayaking, ice-skating), or try to spot 50 kinds of trees or birds (for a digital assist on the latter, check out App We Love, below).

2 | **Join a club.** Having fun with other families is a great way to get kids jazzed about the wild. That’s the idea behind the nonprofit Children & Nature Network’s Family Nature Clubs, which can connect you with existing clubs or provide a kit of information on how to start one. Groups of families come together to splash in rivers, hike in parks, or go on bug safaris. “Often you’ll see kids running off together in excitement,” says Erickson.



APP WE LOVE

Lure your kids on a mood-boosting hike by turning it into a birding quest. **Merlin Bird ID**, from Cornell University’s Lab of Ornithology, will ask five simple questions about the bird you spotted (What color is it? What is it doing?), then come up with a list of possible matches, each including photos, sounds, and other details, from its catalog of 400 of North America’s most common birds. **Free, iOS and Android**



Getting active outdoors has proven payoffs for body and mind.

HANG OUT WITH FIDO

There’s magic in a little dog cuddle! Results from a preliminary study at the University of Missouri, Columbia, suggest that a few minutes of stroking your pooch prompts the release of a number of feel-good hormones in humans. And cat lovers, take heart. Similar research has found other pets are powerful stress relievers, too—at least when they aren’t clawing the sofa.



7 celebrate sunny thinking

We humans evolved to be on the lookout for the bad, what scientists call a “negativity bias.” Sure, this worked for our early ancestors. You don’t want to be admiring the daffodils and oblivious to the charging lion. In the modern world, however, this same tendency can make pessimists of us all. **The good news: we can train ourselves to look on the bright side.** “Our brains are giant filters, and they look for patterns,” says Christine Carter. “If you practice looking for the good, you’re saying to your brain, ‘This is what’s important.’ You’ll establish new neural connections that way.”

One easy technique for encouraging optimism—in your kids and yourself—is a routine Carter started when her daughters were small. At bedtime, she’d take a moment to recount three good things from her day, then have the girls do the same. “There is plenty of scientific evidence that the regular and conscious practice of gratitude increases well-being, both physical and emotional,” she says. At the very least, it’ll bring sweet dreams, and at the most, it’ll foster many sunny days ahead for the ones you love.

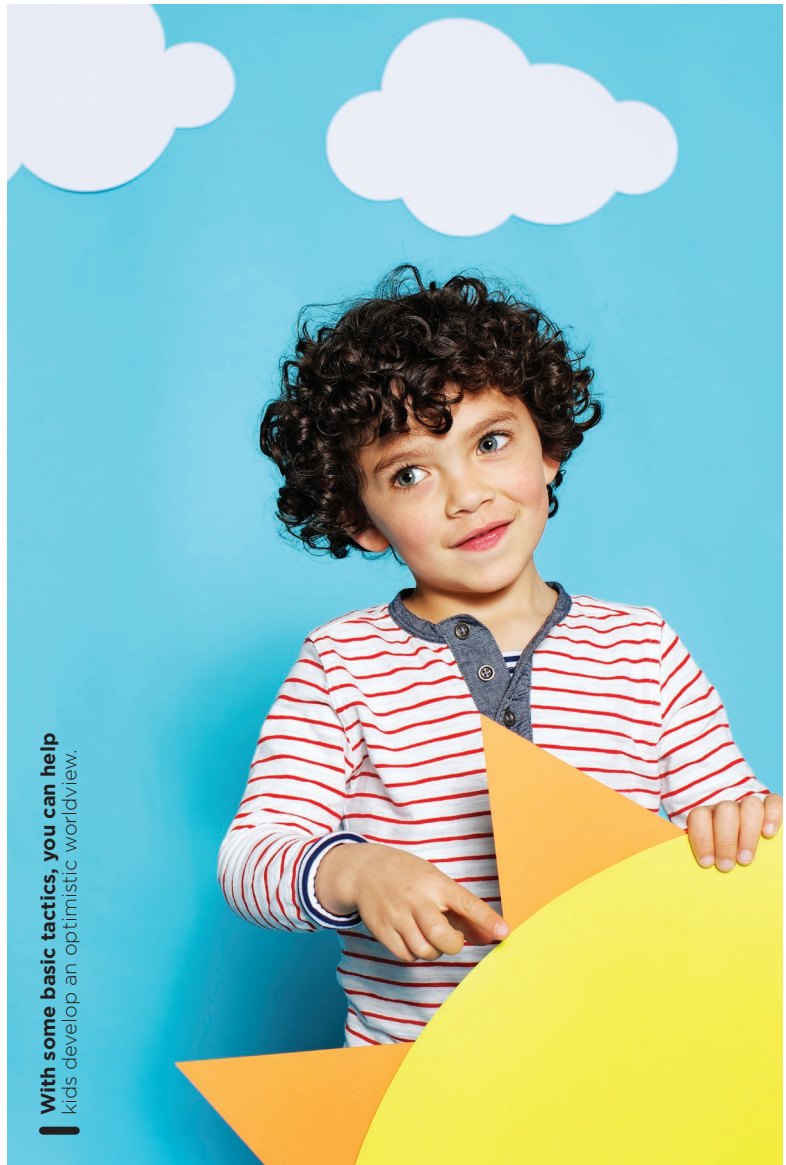
MAKE HAPPY HAPPEN

1 | Play bright-side bingo on errands. On our **printable bingo cards**, kids cross off squares when they spot an upbeat moment, such as someone being helpful or a friendly good-bye.

2 | Be a spin doctor. When your child complains about losing a Lego piece, say “Maybe someone else will find it and build something cool!” You can even turn this into a fairly hilarious game, spinning wild “unfortunately/fortunately” scenarios.

THE WISH LIST ...

We asked kids: What would you wish for to make your family happier?



With some basic tactics, you can help kids develop an optimistic worldview.

BRIGHTER STARTS

Put a smile on everyone’s face by trading in your go-to breakfast for one of these morning meals fortified with mood-boosting nutrients, as recommended by Dr. Drew Ramsey, author of *The Happiness Diet*. (See his list of happy nutrients on page 72.)

REPLACE THIS ↓

FROZEN BREAKFAST ENTRÉE

MEGA MUFFIN

INSTANT OATMEAL, HONEY, AND NUTS

WITH THAT ↓

2 EGGS SCRAMBLED WITH CHOPPED KALE OR SPINACH, PUMPKIN SEEDS, AND A SPRINKLE OF CURRY POWDER

SMOOTHIE WITH COCOA POWDER, FROZEN BANANA OR BLUEBERRIES, KALE AND COCONUT WATER OR MILK

STEEL-CUT OATS WITH FRESH FRUIT, HONEY, AND NUTS

Jennifer King Lindley, a freelance reporter and writer in South Bend, Indiana, contributes to Real Simple, Allrecipes Magazine, and other magazines. She's never happier than when she's covered in pet hair—and now she knows why.