

Joy Multiplier

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How do you respond when your child comes to you with a problem and wants to talk about it? You probably stop what you are doing, pull up a chair and listen attentively. You're likely engaged, ask questions, and offer advice. Now think about how you respond when your child comes to you with good news to share. You likely listen as you continue to prepare the meal, answer emails, play with your baby, or whatever else you were doing as you listen. Then you may say something like, "That's great, Sweetie! I'm happy for you!"

Your authentic interest in your children's concerns and problems helps them feel understood. They learn that you will be there when things go wrong. However, if you tend to respond more passively and distractedly when your children share everyday good news (a good grade in school, a cool bug in the grass, the amazing new peanut butter and catsup cookie he or she just invented), they might wonder: "Will you be there for me when things go right?"

In fact, "Will you be there for me when things go right" describes a new psychological study about the way we respond when people share good news with us.* The research shows that when people *actively* respond to another's good news (e.g., asking questions, sharing their enthusiasm, being engaged and focused, helping the other person to relive and savor the positive experience), both feel happier, closer, more trusting of each other, and generally more positive about the relationship.

To put it another way, when your child, spouse, or friend brings you news of joy, you can be a Joy Multiplier simply by taking a few moments to stop and be fully present with the other person. On the flip side, when someone you care about brings you news of joy and you don't give authentic interest, you are depriving yourselves of an opportunity to strengthen the bond you share. You are unintentionally being a Joy Thief!

Think about the following questions:

1. When are you a Joy Multiplier? (e.g., What times of day? With whom? With what kinds of

good news?)

2. When are you a Joy Thief (e.g., What times of day? With whom? With what kinds of good news?)

3. What can you say to yourself to help you to be a Joy Multiplier more often? For me, just remembering the question, "Will you be there for me when things go right?" helps me to stay active and constructive.

You can teach your children to be Joy Multipliers by modeling an active constructive style of responding to their good news. Active means to be engaged in the conversation – not distracted and not multi-tasking while you talk. Being constructive means being positive and helping to build the positive emotion. The trick to being a Joy Multiplier is to ask questions that help your child savor the positive experience while sharing in their positive emotion. Here are some examples of what a Joy Multiplier versus a Joy Thief might say to a child's good news.

Child: Mom, I found the coolest looking bug in the yard!

- Joy Thief: Ugh. I hate bugs. Please take that back outside!
- Joy Multiplier: Wow! That is pretty cool looking! Where did you find it? What do you think it eats? I've never seen so many legs on a creature

Child: I just made a great new cookie! I took a chocolate chip cookie and covered it with peanut butter and squirted ketchup on top! It tastes great!

- Joy Thief: That's nice, sweetie. Now go wash up for dinner...
- Joy Multiplier: Wow, how creative! What did it taste like? What are you going to name your new cookie?

When you hear your child respond to a friend or sibling by being a Joy Thief, encourage your child to ask a question or two about the other person's experience. You might even say, "Let's see if we can help your sister really enjoy her good news! What could you say or ask her that will help her to get every last drop of happiness out of that experience?" Remember, the more you practice being a Joy Multiplier, the easier it will be for you to stay in this mode with your children, spouse, and friends. And your good example will help your children learn this valuable relationship-strengthening tool that will benefit them their entire lives!

* Source: Gable, S. L., Gonzaga, G., & Strachman, A. (2006). Will you be there for me when things go right? Social Support for Positive Events. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 91, 904-917.

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