

Finding Flow: Encouraging Positive Mental Health for You and Your Children

As parents, many of us hope to give our children the best possible opportunity to live their lives with joy, pursue their passions, and contribute to society in such a way that benefits both themselves as well as their fellow human beings. This tall order comes with a sense of responsibility and perhaps an unclear sense of how we can encourage these outcomes for our children. While we certainly cannot control these outcomes, we can provide a foundation for our children that will promote the opportunities we envision and hope for them. How do we approach this? Where do we start?

The field of psychology gives us some direction with a focus that, in some areas of specialty, has shifted away from one of pathology and disease to one that focuses on the promotion of mental health and well-being. Appropriately enough, the supporters of this sub-field of psychology term this shift in focus as “positive psychology.” Dr. Martin Seligman, considered the founding father of positive psychology, is director of the Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania (www.authentic happiness.sas.upenn.edu). Dr. Seligman and other researchers who have pioneered the positive psychology movement focus on the promotion of positive mental health by studying the psychological processes that underlie this state.

One of the psychological processes that encourages a positive state of mind is called “flow.” Flow, also referred to as optimal experience, defines a state in which a person is truly engaged in and fulfilled by what is happening in the moment. Researchers believe flow is attained when a person perceives both a challenge and his/her skill at meeting that challenge to be high (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975/2000). That is, one’s particular set of skills meets the demands of a given challenge or activity. Imagine if you will what a competitive athlete experiences while engaged in her chosen event, or what an artist experiences while immersed in painting his version of the Mona Lisa. Csikszentmihalyi (pronounced: “cheeks sent me high”) outlines several factors—not all of which need to be present—that may underlie or promote flow, or optimal experience:

- There are clear goals for the particular activity, that although are attainable, require active engagement to be met.
- The person possesses the skill level needed to meet the demands of the challenge or activity.
- The person experiences a sense of control regarding the situation and the outcome.
- The activity requires a person’s concentration and focus.
- The activity is intrinsically rewarding; that is, you undertake it for the sake of doing it.
- There is a feeling of serenity. Awareness of feelings of self-consciousness, worry, or of the frustrations of everyday life is pushed aside.
- Sense of time is altered; hours may seem to pass by in minutes, or minutes can seem like hours.
- Engagement in the activity or challenge provides immediate feedback.

You may ask, however, “What if I’m not an athlete or an artist – how can I experience flow?” Flow experiences are attainable by most anyone given that she can focus her attention. Consider for yourself those activities that transport you to a place beyond your day-to-day concerns and feelings. What absorbs your attention? Is it cooking a new recipe? Reading a book with your child? Solving the Sunday morning crossword puzzle?

A sample of Americans were asked the question, “Do you ever get involved in something so deeply that nothing else seems to matter, and you lose track of time?” Approximately 20 percent of respondents reported that they often, as much as several times a day, experience this state. Fifteen percent of the sample reported the other extreme, that is, that they never experience this state (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). You may say, “What if I’m one of the 15 percent?” Remember, a state of flow can be achieved, with focus and attention, at will. While the pleasures of life, what “makes someone happy,” sometimes may seem elusive, or at the very least, fleeting, experiencing flow is a state of enjoyment that a person can create for him or herself (Seligman, 2000; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

There are conditions that create the likelihood that one will experience a state of flow. As previously stated, one’s ability to focus his or her attention and concentration is important (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). The more skilled one is at directing this energy, the more likely flow will be experienced. As mentioned in a recent “Hot Topic” article, there is a growing body of research on the practice of mindfulness meditation and how it may develop a person’s ability to focus and concentrate (see, for example, Kabat-Zinn, 2005). Another important element that increases the likelihood of experiencing flow is the ability to interpret one’s experiences as intrinsically enjoyable or to engage in activities for the sake of experiencing the activity versus doing something in anticipation of reward or acknowledgement (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). Intrinsically motivated people, skilled at focusing their attention on an activity for its own sake, are primed to have flow experiences.

As parents, we have the opportunity to model the behavior we would like to see our children adopt; therefore, we can teach our children the importance of and pleasure in flow experiences by engaging in activities in which we experience flow ourselves. We also can support our children’s own independent development of flow. By doing so, we are giving our children the opportunity for experiences that have important implications for the development of their positive mental health (McHale, Crouter, & Tucker, 2001). Kevin Rathunde (1989) examined the variables in a family context that facilitate flow. He suggests that the context within a family that promotes the focus of a child’s attention may, in effect, socialize the child to become more capable of and enjoy seeking out and participating in experiences for the sake of the experiences in and of themselves. As a result, this may render the child more likely to experience flow states. The family context that promotes the focus of a child’s attention promotes a skill that will serve the child outside of the family setting, in multiple environments including school, social relationships, and organized activities.

Flow experiences are facilitated through parents’ support in helping to structure their children’s experiences. Rathunde (1988) describes a balance of five components—choice, clarity, centering, commitment, and challenge—which a parent may incorporate to create a context that encourages the development and appreciation of flow in children:

- Provide the child with a perceived **choice** in activity, and thus, a feeling of control – e.g., *Mom asks ten-year-old Kate, “Which sport do you want to sign-up for this Spring?”*
- Give the child **clarity** regarding the activity so that she may be best able to pay attention and engage in the chosen activity – e.g., *Dad says to five-year-old Susie, “If you are going to paint you need to wear your smock and paint at the kitchen table.”*
- **Center** the child’s attention on the immediacy of the activity, rather than on the consequences for completing the activity – e.g., *Mom says to eight-year-old Peter while he is reading a story to her, “It’s fun when we read together.”*
- Provide the child with a sense of **commitment** or trust that will allow him or her to feel comfortable in attempting the activity – e.g., *Mom says to three-year-old Danny, “I like how you painted the cow blue.”*

- Structure meaningful **challenges** for the child within the context of the activity, so that he is able to have the experience of being successful meeting a challenge within his ability level – e.g., *Dad says to five-year-old Paul, “When you finish coloring the dog, can you color the rooster red?”*

To experience the enjoyment that flow provides, there is a balance: choosing an activity that is too easy can result in feelings of boredom, while choosing an activity that is too difficult can result in feelings of anxiety. As a result, choosing an activity that promotes individual growth requires a certain level of introspection and self-knowledge. Parents can structure their own experiences to correspond with their needs and interests and teach their children to do the same. Each person will achieve flow experiences based upon his or her individual needs, abilities, and interests. Perhaps by incorporating the ideas behind positive psychology in our parenting we can give our children a sense of how, as adults, they may continue to create for themselves experiences of joy, pursue their passions, and choose to move through this world in a way that not only benefits themselves, but society as a whole.

Research/Resources Cited in This Article:

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Additional Resources:

Kabat-Zinn, M. & Kabat-Zinn, J. (1997). *Everyday Blessings: The inner work of mindful parenting*. New York: Hyperion.

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<http://www.authentichappiness.sas.upenn.edu> Dr. Martin Seligman, founder of the positive psychology movement, has created this website providing resources to assist people in identifying their strengths and promote their positive mental health and well-being.

<http://mentalhealthnews.org> This website of the Mental Health News Organization (MHNO), an off-shoot of the News By The Second Organization, provides articles written by journalists, mental health, and medical professionals providing the latest research findings in the field of positive psychology and concrete strategies that can be used to support mental health.

<http://www.psychologytoday.com/articles/199707/finding-flow> This article provides a good synopsis of the book, 'Finding Flow' by Dr. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi.