



**Alexander, Jessica Joelle and Iben Dissing Sandahl. (2016). The Danish Way of Parenting: What the Happiest People in the World Know About Raising Confident, Capable Kids. New York: Tarcher Perigee.**

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Denmark's record of having the "happiest people in the world" has been held for almost forty years now. When authors Jessica Joelle Alexander and Iben Dissing Sandahl, came across this their initial thought was how such an incredible accomplishment could be maintained for so long. After thorough research, interviews, and observations they composed "The Danish Way of Parenting: What the Happiest People in the World Know About Raising Confident, Capable Kids." Alexander who is married to a Danish man, and Sandahl a Danish psychotherapist, found the answer to their question to be very simple. The secret to how the Danes can achieve such an amazing title is built in the upbringing of their children. In the introduction, the authors state "happy kids grow to be happy adults who raise happy kids, and so on." This sets a strong perspective on what the Danes prioritize when raising children. To engage readers the authors formatted this book into Chapters which make up the acronym PARENT. This stands for play, authenticity, reframing, empathy, no ultimatums, and togetherness which are the most prominent factors founded in the Danish parenting culture.

Within the last fifty years, the United States has had a dramatic decrease in the amount of time given for a child to play, while simultaneously having an increase in the number of mental

health disorders being diagnosed (Chapter 2). The Danish culture holds onto the idea that free play is vital during childhood development as it causes them to be less anxious, develop coping mechanisms on their own, and strengthen social skills (Chapter 2). Danish people believe that a child needs their own space to learn and grow at different levels depending on the individual. Having the opportunity to solve certain situations on their own encourages self-esteem and developing problem-solving skills. For example, when children are playing a game, each child learns to play cooperatively because if their peers quit, the game will be over (Chapter 2). Children who were pushed to learn a certain behaviour or skill show high levels of anxiety as they grow compared to those who were able to learn at their own pace.

When a child asks an adult why they look upset, they are often met with a response similar to “Do not worry nothing is wrong” or “I am not upset I am happy.” The authors label this as being damaging to a child as it confuses the way that they believe one’s behaviour should be during different emotions. Professor Silvia Knobloch-Westerwick and colleagues at Ohio State University have conducted research that highlights how watching sad movies will lead to people focusing on the good in their lives, and therefore lead to them feeling happy (Chapter 3). Over-complementing a child is an act that a lot of parents do to guard their children’s feelings or make them feel important. Unfortunately, this book indicates how this technique enables children to develop a “fixed mindset.” This refers to when children are constantly being rewarded for their achievements and they begin to see themselves as only what they accomplish. For example, during a study where children were asked what the definition of intelligence is. Those with a fixed mindset acknowledged this as a trait that one is born with, while the children with a growth mindset thought

intelligence is something that one can work towards (Chapter 3).

The idea behind reframing is to always seek out the good in any situation and to be conscious of the way one speaks. The authors explain how there are endless benefits of raising a child in an optimistic environment and as the parent, being a positive role model is key to a child's success. When observing an event where a child is upset about losing their game, the parent can take this opportunity to turn it into something positive with the use of humour. For example, the authors suggested that if a child loses their soccer game and says, "I am a failure" the parent can reply "Did you break a leg?" The child may feel confused, and the parent can then say "I don't see that your leg is broken, so you can always keep practicing to make the next game better" (Chapter 4). This is labelled as a great technique for a parent to use during negative situations to efficiently shift the child's focus to be more positive.

As the years go by it seems that society is turning into a game of "survival of the fittest" when referring to the high concentration of competition that a person feels towards their peers. That is why Danish culture stresses the importance of instilling empathy in their children during childhood development. Alexander and Sandahl argue that "we are all wired for empathy" (Chapter 5). The way that Danish parents teach this to their kids is by demonstrating to them the power of words and not being judgemental. When listening to Danes speak about other children in front of their own, it is filled with positive attributes and is usually ended with an open-ended question. An example of this would be "That was very kind of him, would you agree?" Regarding being non-judgemental, Danish parents format their words to show empathy in ways like "Aw,

can you see that boy crying? Why do you think he is crying?” This teaches children to put themselves in the other person’s shoes which will open their minds to perspectives other than their own.

Out of the four parenting styles mentioned (authoritarian, authoritative, permissive, and uninvolved), the parenting style in Denmark follows the patterns of authoritative best (Chapter 6). This means that the parents will be demanding when necessary but are considerate and supportive of their children’s needs. When a child asks a question about why they cannot do something, Danish culture does not see the benefit of responding “because I said so” or have the “it is my way or the highway” ideology. They believe children are inherently good and treat them with respect. Another lesson taken from the Danish culture is their idea of “choosing your battles” which refers to evaluating why a parent is upset with their child and asking themselves if it is worth the battle.

A fundamental practice in the Danish culture is called *hygge* which translates to “cozy around together.” Danes stress on the importance of togetherness by spending a great amount of time with family and friends. During this time together they may do activities like singing which was found to release a chemical hormone in the brain called oxytocin that is responsible for making a person feel happy (Chapter 7). Interestingly enough, a study consisting of over 300,000 people across the globe showed that those with weak social connections had about fifty percent higher chances of dying sooner than those with strong social connections (Chapter 7). One unique tactic that Danes use in their society is that when a mother gives birth to her child, their contact information is given to mothers nearby who have recently given birth to support each other. They attend a support group once a week, and this has become a foundational practice to promote

mothers and their newborns to feel connected and loved.

Alexander and Sandahl use a variety of ways to gather information when composing this piece of writing. Not only do they use data obtained from Danish people, but also from other countries across the globe. This provides readers with an insightful comparison of what Danish people are like as opposed to other populations. One thought that crossed my mind when reading this was that if Danish people who are living in different countries still feel this level of happiness or if it is unique to those living in Denmark. Nonetheless, this would be a beneficial read to those who are planning on having children or those who are already parents. People in the field of sociology or psychology may also find interest in this book as it exposes readers to new family dynamics and factors that may affect childhood development. “The Danish Way of Parenting: What the Happiest People in the World Know About Raising Confident, Capable Kids” was an incredible book to read and it opened my mind to new perspectives on social behaviour.