

HEALTH

When author Helen Russell first moved to Denmark, she was struck by how much happier and healthier the Danes appeared to be. After her husband got a job at Lego, they emigrated and, 10 years on, they are raising three children, aged between six and nine, the Danish way. Helen, 43, wrote about the fascinating cultural differences between Britain and the Nordic nation in her bestselling book *The Year Of Living Danishly*. Her follow-up *How To Raise A Viking* focuses more specifically on parenting, as she tries to uncover why Denmark has regularly topped polls of the happiest nations on earth since the '70s.

Children in Nordic countries – Iceland, Finland, Norway, Sweden and Denmark – have the highest rates of wellbeing globally, while kids in the UK and US suffer more mental ill health than any other wealthy nation, according to UNICEF. Danes also take an arguably less dogmatic approach to parenting than here in Britain. For instance, children don't learn to read until they're around seven or eight, there is minimal homework and they put on their own clothes from toddler age. What lessons can we take from Nordic parenting? Here are Helen's tips on raising mini Vikings.

GET OUTSIDE, WHATEVER THE WEATHER

Come rain or shine, the Danes embrace the outdoors and the elements all year round. "You are lucky to have a body that works, so you get out in nature every day and get your body moving," says Helen, who highlights the abundance of research demonstrating the benefits of spending time in nature. "However, three-quarters of children in the UK spend less time outside than prison inmates.* Plus, there is a tendency to stay indoors when it's wet and windy. In Nordic countries, there is no such thing as bad weather, just the wrong clothes." What benefit does this have, other than making you even more appreciative of the sofa when you return home? "It is helping to raise your children's tolerance for discomfort," says Helen. "When they've managed to do a hard thing, they feel confident, proud and have a sense of mastery over their bodies and their surroundings. It helps children to be more confident and self-sufficient being outside in nature." Denmark has far colder winters than the UK, so really, we have no excuse.

EAT HEARTILY AND TOGETHER

According to Helen, Danes are surprised at how much us Brits love crisps. In Denmark, children aren't exposed to such foods. "You can't even buy individual packets of crisps where I live in Jutland," says Helen. "Of course, there are Danish pastries, and people eat a lot of butter. But the emphasis is to give children food to fuel them – oats, rye bread and fresh, seasonal produce." Family meals are also sacrosanct and *hyggeligt* – cosy and comforting. "Danes always sit together as a family for mealtimes. It is never in front of the TV," says Helen. "And there are no ultimatums, none of the: 'If you don't eat your greens, there is no pudding,' which can lead to rows." Children are not refused food when they are hungry, helping teach them intuitive eating early. Similarly, "If a child says they are not hungry, there is no big fuss."

How to raise the happiest kids in the world

Take some tips from the Danes and nurture your very own Viking child, wherever you live **BY SUSAN GRIFFIN**

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MAKE PLAYTIME A PRIORITY

In Nordic countries, playtime is so important they named it twice – *spille* means games, music and sports with rules or structure, while *lege* means to play with imagination or just for the heck of it. "It is believed you need both," says Helen. Many UK children are now so over-scheduled, they have no time to play. "But studies suggest play makes us happier and healthier, and can aid learning, improve problem-solving and even help with social mobility and reducing inequality," she says.** Physically, play-fighting is deemed good for you, too. "It doesn't matter if you get a few bumps and bruises," says Helen, who was surprised when Danes insisted she also play with her children to strengthen parent-child bonds. The next time your kids have a teddy bears' tea party, why not join them? "I often feel like I don't have time to play, but the idea is that you make that a priority," Helen adds.

SING LOUD AND PROUD

Brits are notoriously self-conscious, but Danes love to sing! "Singing is seen as good for the soul, and singing together is even better," says Helen. "Danes will sing together in schools, offices, sports groups and community events. It instils a sense that you are involved in something larger than yourself and in tune with others. It's also proven to release the hormone oxytocin, which lowers stress and increases a feeling of togetherness." During the pandemic, a fifth of Danes tuned into singalongs led by conductor Phillip Faber, while Brits preferred Joe Wicks' PE classes. Helen suggests encouraging your kids to sing while in the car. "When there's no one to hear them, the kids will join in," she says. "Or have a kitchen disco – anything where you are doing something in synchronicity. It releases endorphins, so makes you all feel good."

ENCOURAGE PUBLIC SPEAKING

Although Danish children might not learn to read until they are a little older, they are always encouraged to find their voice, telling stories and sharing their opinions. "The Danes believe it is crucial that children feel what they have to say is worthwhile and that adults will listen," says Helen. "That is important these days when lots of people in the UK feel as though they don't have a voice and are frustrated. Even encouraging your kids to order from a menu, or to pay for something in a shop by themselves makes a difference. Normalising speaking out does so much for their confidence."

DON'T OVER-PRAISE

In Denmark, not every milestone in a child's life is cause for excessive celebration or, as Helen puts it: "Not every picture needs to go on the fridge. In Denmark and other Nordic countries, children are equals and respect is a given, you don't need to earn it," she says. "You assume your parents love you, it is not dependent on anything, so children don't have to spend their lives looking for external validation. They know that they are worthy within themselves." **F**

● *How To Raise A Viking: The Secrets Of Parenting The World's Happiest Children by Helen Russell (£16.99, Fourth Estate) is out now.*