

## **They raise the world's happiest children - so is it time you went Dutch?**

### **10 things that set Dutch children apart from those in the UK and the US**

- Dutch babies get more sleep.
- Dutch kids have little or no homework at primary school.
- Are not just seen but also heard.
- Are trusted to ride their bikes to school on their own.
- Are allowed to play outside unsupervised.
- Have regular family meals.
- Get to spend more time with their mothers and fathers.
- Enjoy simple pleasures and are happy with second-hand toys.
- And last but not least, get to eat chocolate sprinkles (hagelslag) for breakfast.



Dutch children come top of the world's happiest kids. CREDIT: ALAMY

### **Full text of the article written by: Rina Mae Acosta and Michele Hutchison**

Two toddlers have just chased each other to the top of a climbing frame and are jostling to get down the slide first. Their mothers are lost in conversation on a nearby park bench. In the distance, a dog barks and a little boy ambles along on his balance bike, trailed by his grandfather who is pushing a buggy. A gang of older children in tracksuits comes racing along the bike path, laughing and joking. They overtake a young mum who is cycling more slowly, balancing a baby in a seat on the front of her bike and a toddler on the back. A group of girls is playing piggy-in-the-middle on the grass, their joyful shrieks filling the air. Not far away, some boys are perfecting their skateboarding moves. None of the school-age children is accompanied by adults.

This happy scene isn't from a movie. It's just a regular Wednesday afternoon in springtime in Amsterdam's Vondelpark, a scene enacted all across the Netherlands every day.

As an American mum and a British mum, both of us married to Dutchmen and raising our kids in Amsterdam, we have found it hard not to notice how happy Dutch children are.

In 2013, a Unicef report rated Dutch children the happiest in the world. According to researchers, Dutch kids are ahead of their peers in childhood wellbeing when compared with 29 of the world's richest industrialised countries. The United Kingdom came 16th and the United States ranked 26th, just above Lithuania, Latvia and Romania – the three poorest countries in the survey. Children from the Netherlands were in the top five in each of the categories assessed: material wellbeing; health and safety; education; behaviours and risks; and housing and environment. In fact, the Dutch scored highest for behaviours and risks, as well as for education (a category in which the UK came 24th).

When it came to Dutch children rating their own happiness levels, more than 95 per cent considered themselves happy. Several other research surveys have likewise highlighted the positive benefits of growing up in the Netherlands – Britain's Child Poverty Action Group and the World Health Organisation, for example. The Unicef report was a follow-up to one conducted in 2007, in which the Netherlands were first heralded as a prime example of childhood prosperity. The UK and the US ranked in the two lowest positions.

In addition, new research also suggests that Dutch babies are happier than their American counterparts. After examining the temperamental differences between babies born in the US and the Netherlands, Dutch babies were found to be more contented – laughing, smiling and cuddling more – than American babies. Dutch babies were also easier to soothe, while American babies displayed more fear, sadness and frustration. Psychologists attribute this discrepancy to the different cultural mores of child-rearing in the two countries. It's quite astonishing to us that no one seems to be making more of a fuss about this.

As an American mum and a British mum, both of us married to Dutchmen and raising our kids in Amsterdam, we have found it hard not to notice how happy Dutch children are. The scene we described above should give you an idea why: Dutch children enjoy freedoms denied to children in the countries we come from, and thrive on them (see box).



Michele and Rina and their children. CREDIT: CLARA MOLDEN

The Netherlands have a reputation for being a liberal country with a tolerance of sex, drugs and alcohol, yet beneath this lies a closely guarded secret: the Dutch are actually fairly conservative people. At the heart of Dutch culture is a society of home-loving people who place the child firmly at the centre. Parents have a healthy attitude towards their kids, seeing them as individuals rather than as extensions of themselves. They understand that achievement doesn't necessarily lead to happiness, but that happiness can cultivate achievement. The Dutch have reined in the anxiety, stress and expectations of modern-day parenting, redefining the meaning of success and wellbeing. For them, success starts with happiness – that of their children and themselves.

### **Stress-free schooling**

Children at primary school aren't expected to do homework, and they don't swot for exams. It's the kind of childhood that many of us are nostalgic for. A childhood from black-and-white photographs, old movies and Enid Blyton books.

*"The Dutch definitely do not care if little Sophie or Sem is a piano prodigy, a chess champion or an Instagram model famous by the age of two."*



In all Dutch primary schools, kids start school at four but don't officially start structured learning – reading, writing and arithmetic – until they are six years old, in year 3. If they do show interest in these subjects earlier, they are provided with the materials to explore them for themselves. Both of Michele's children learnt to read and write in their first year of school this way, but there was no pressure. Friends who learnt to read later, in the third year, at six or seven, showed no particular disadvantage in having learnt later and soon caught up.



Michele and Rina's kids enjoy the freedoms of Dutch children. CREDIT: CLARA MOLDEN



In the Netherlands, children like going to school, and this is something that is also reflected in the research Unicef collated in 2013. Dutch children are among the least likely to feel pressured by schoolwork and scored highly in terms of finding their classmates friendly and helpful.

The Dutch definitely do not care if little Sophie or Sem is a piano prodigy, a chess champion or an Instagram model famous by the age of two. There are no Baby Einstein DVDs being played, no black-and-white flash cards being used, and definitely no baby enrichment classes or baby gyms, at least not outside the major cities. The Dutch aren't concerned about their babies being the smartest. They seem to just want them to be the easiest.

## **Happy parents have happy kids**

They have a realistic perspective on parenthood and understand that they (and their children) are far from perfect. They are parents who live in the real world. That's not to say that they don't still struggle with the daily realities and messiness of life. But because they are more forgiving of their own imperfections and shortfalls, they're able to enjoy parenthood.

*"Dutch fathers are not afraid of looking like sissies – they take an equal role in child-rearing and household chores."*

Dutch society has fought for and achieved an enviable work-life balance. As the part-time-work champions of Europe, the Dutch work on average 29 hours a week, dedicate at least one day a week to spending time with their children, and pencil in time for themselves, too. You won't find a Dutch mother expressing guilt about the amount of time she spends with her children – she will make a point of finding time for herself outside motherhood and work. Sturdy, windswept and self-assured, these mums don't start to stress about getting back into shape the minute they leave the hospital with their new baby. And Dutch mums don't do for their children things they are capable of doing themselves – they believe in encouraging independence at the appropriate age. They are confident and calm. There's none of that "mompitition" or mummy guilt you see in the UK and the US.

Dutch fathers are not afraid of looking like sissies – they take an equal role in child-rearing and household chores. They look after their kids on their days off and help put the little ones to bed. You're just as likely to see a dad pushing a pram or wearing a baby-carrier as a mum.



A Dutch family spend quality time outside together. CREDIT: ALAMY

## On discipline

The Dutch parenting style hits that elusive balance between parental involvement and benign neglect. It is authoritative, not authoritarian.

In the Netherlands, children are encouraged to act spontaneously. Play is more important than being quietly obedient. The Dutch believe in inspiring children to explore the world around them and to learn from that. Play can be noisy and disruptive to other people, something the French would not tolerate and Britons and Americans might disapprove of.

*“Dutch children are expected to be friendly and helpful towards their elders but not to automatically defer to them.”*

Discipline is not punishment-based. For the Dutch, it is about teaching socially appropriate behaviour. In a society without a strong social hierarchy, deferring to your elders or betters is a foreign concept, so you don't get the kind of polite deference from children you might get in France – or in Asia, for that matter. Dutch children are expected to be friendly and helpful towards their elders but not to automatically defer to them. Everyone is on an equal footing. Children are unlikely to be wilfully disobedient, but they are more likely to fight their corner. Learning to put forward a good argument is seen as a useful life skill and so encouraged.



Dutch children are seen and heard. CREDIT: ALAMY

Dutch parenting experts recommend that adults set a good example so that their child will copy them. Two common expressions translate as “Parenting is practising what you preach” and “What the old cock crows, the young cock learns”. Experts also advise parents not to ask a child to do something, but to tell him or her, to say firmly, “I want you to...” The idea is to not give the child a choice of options but to give clear directions.

Discipline is not about forcing your child to do things, or getting into power struggles with them, spying on them or checking up on them, threatening them, screaming or shouting. Instead, desirable behaviour should be reinforced with praise; unacceptable behaviour should be stopped firmly and immediately.



## Biking in the rain

Dutch children enjoy a huge degree of freedom: they ride their bikes to school, play on the streets and visit friends after school, all unaccompanied. It's a part of the Dutch character to go outside in all weathers. Children will happily play outside in the rain. Sporting activities are rarely cancelled due to bad weather. If it's wet, the Dutch wear anoraks. If they're wearing smart clothes, they learn to cycle carrying an umbrella in one hand. "There's no such thing as bad weather, only bad clothing," Dutch parents say.



Rina and Michele believe it is important children play outside. CREDIT: CLARA MOLDEN

Children are expected to be the same. Given an equal role in the family, children are taught to be self-sufficient and accept responsibility at an early age. Playing outside unsupervised is a rite of passage that teaches them independence and toughens them up.

Dutch culture is suffused with the idealised image of a child who is rosy-cheeked from outdoor fun, their blond hair mussed up. Independent outdoor play is seen as the antidote to breeding passive, media-addicted couch potatoes.

### **It's all about the 'hagelslag'**

According to the 2013 Unicef report – the one that declared Dutch kids were the happiest in the world – 85 per cent of the Dutch children aged 11, 13 and 15 surveyed ate breakfast every day.

Is there something special about eating hagelslag (chocolate sprinkles) for breakfast? Is that really what makes Dutch children so happy?

*"The Dutch are champions of breakfast time and seem to be happier and healthier because of it."*

Sitting down to eat around the table as a family, before school and the working day, is a routine that underpins Dutch family life. In no other country do families eat breakfast together as regularly as they do in the Netherlands. In American and British families, breakfast is a meal that's often skipped altogether, in the rush to get out of the house on time. What the Dutch seem to understand is the importance of eating regular meals, starting with the meal that breaks the night-time fast. There's an abundance of research that points out the benefits of having breakfast every morning: it's said to reduce the risk of snacking on unhealthy foods throughout the day, decrease the risk of obesity and increase a child's ability to concentrate at school. The Dutch are champions of breakfast time and seem to be happier and healthier because of it. But the real point is that they put as much value on the idea of starting the day together around the breakfast table, a calming and bonding experience for all the family.



Dutch children have chocolate hagelslag for breakfast. CREDIT: ALAMY

## **Dutch teenagers don't rebel**

Dutch teenagers don't possess that posturing arrogance, but rather a mature self-assurance. Even though it is culturally acceptable to have romantic sleepovers, the Netherlands also has one of the lowest rates of teenage pregnancy in the world. These well-adjusted children grow up prepared to deal with the trials and tribulations of adult life.

In addition, binge drinking, which is such a problem among teenagers in the UK, is not a behaviour that Dutch parents of teenagers worry about. In an OECD study, the UK, Estonia and Denmark are at the top of the list, with the Netherlands last of the 26 countries surveyed, along with the US (because of stricter laws prohibiting under-age drinking), Italy and Iceland. Research also suggests that children who have a good relationship with their parents drink less.

Drug use here is an interesting issue because of the government's liberal approach. Although there are lots of "coffee shops" that sell marijuana, not only are they off-limits to under-18s, no coffee shop can operate within 250m of a school. Official figures from 2011 state that around 19 per cent of boys and 14 per cent of girls of secondary-school age have tried cannabis. Michele's husband believes that the relative ease with which children can try cannabis makes the experience less of a thrilling prospect. He tried it himself as a teenager and thought, "So what?" It never became a habit.

## **The simple life**

The norm in the Netherlands is simplicity: families tend to choose simple, low-cost activities and take a back-to-basics approach. Children are used to having second-hand toys. Each year on King's Day in April, as part of the vrijmarkt, the Vondelpark in Amsterdam is transformed into a vast open-air children's market, and this is replicated in villages and towns around the country.

*"The Dutch opt for time, not money, and practicality over luxury."*

While many British and American kids are being brought up surrounded by the spoils of a booming consumer economy and demand the latest toys and fashions, Dutch kids are playing outdoors in nearly new clothes on second-hand roller skates. One of the things we know about happiness is that people are happier in countries where there is less social inequality.

Dutch birthdays, and most other celebrations, are more about celebrating togetherness. There's no attempting to outdo the Joneses – or, in the case of the Dutch, the Heinekens – in terms of expensive birthday presents or fancy clothes. There's a silent pact that presents for your children's friend's birthdays should cost no more than €10.

The Dutch opt for time, not money, and practicality over luxury goods. What Dutch children grow accustomed to in childhood sets them up for life: they are pragmatic and confident, unhampered by anxieties about status.

***The Happiest Kids in the World* by Rina Mae Acosta and Michele Hutchison is published by Doubleday (£14.99). To order your copy for £12.99 plus p&p call 0844 871 1514 or visit [books.telegraph.co.uk](http://books.telegraph.co.uk).**

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## About the authors

### Rina

I'm an Asian-American writer who lives in a Dutch village with my husband, Bram, a Dutch entrepreneur, and our two boys, Bram Julius and Matteo. Originally from the San Francisco Bay Area, I love being an expat in Europe. I was slow to warm to the Dutch way of parenting. Raised on equal parts Catholic guilt and immigrant work ethic (my parents were from the Philippines), the Dutch approach seemed too easy-going, self-centred and lazy to me. I viewed with suspicion the midwife-assisted births, ideally at home and non-medicated. Deeply ingrained in the American psyche is the pursuit of happiness. We strive for perfect parenting, believing that being our children's 24-hour playmates and constant supervisors will win us this coveted prize. And an added jibe – Dutch parents were accomplishing this with a lot less effort. I became fascinated by what the parents around me were doing and began to analyse the differences between their and my approach.

### Michele

Originally from the Midlands, I moved to Amsterdam when I was pregnant with my first baby. When I'm not translating or writing, I'm mainly at my allotment. My husband, Martijn, is a Dutch publisher and, ironically, a great Anglophile. Our eldest child, Ben, has recently started secondary school and is fanatic about dance. Our daughter Ina is an energetic, sporty girl with a passion for maths. The Dutch are also oddly averse to meritocratic procedures. There are no interviews, and places are not allocated according to grades. This is alien to me, as I come from a culture where getting the highest grades is seen as a fast track to success in life. Looking back, I can see that I internalised my parents' ambitions for me. I was a good student, a high achiever and terrified of displeasing my mother. At Ben's age, I was also a competitive swimmer, training every day and often travelling around the country to compete at weekends. I used to throw up in the toilets at the pools, too, terrified of not improving on my personal best. My childhood was one big competition and I had to be the best every time. Unlike Rina, I didn't struggle with my cultural baggage but tried to shake off my British values and integrate. But despite my belief that Holland is the perfect place to bring up kids, it would be wrong to call it paradise here. It hasn't been that easy to integrate and, let's face it, the weather is s---.