

Positive Parenting

Coaxing your kiddo to discover the silver lining isn't as hard as you might think.

BY HOLLY PEVZNER

LISTEN, we all want our kids to be happy and hopeful and to be glass-half-full types. Study after study shows that optimistic children tend to grow up to be successful and resilient adults. Heck, kids don't even have to wait till adulthood to reap the rewards of their sunny disposition. A 2011 study in the journal *Pediatrics* found that, compared with their not-so-optimistic peers, highly optimistic teens cut their risk of depression by nearly half. Perhaps more surprising: High levels of optimism can actually modify the effects of childhood adversity on health, according to a 2020 report in the *International Journal of Behavioral Medicine*. Translation: Hopeful folks are more likely to eat better and be nonsmokers, even if they had a rough childhood.

Sounds like we should all bust out some kid-size rose-colored glasses, right? Not really.

Optimism is not about teaching kids to channel their inner Pollyanna. "That kind of blind optimism is dumb," says psychologist Eileen Kennedy-Moore, the author of 2019's *Kid Confidence*:

Help Your Child Make Friends, Build Resilience, and Develop Real Self-Esteem. "After all, bad things happen in the world all of the time." Whether we're talking little things, like a knocked-over Lego tower or a tanked math test, or big things, like poverty, systemic racism, and a global pandemic, thinking happy thoughts can't change everything. A better—and more useful—way to look at it is this: Essentially, optimism is about "knowing that you have the personal power to make changes big and small and be part of the good in the world," says Mercedes Samudio, a licensed psychotherapist and the author of 2017's *Shame-Proof Parenting: Find Your Unique Parenting Voice, Feel Empowered, and Raise Whole, Healthy Children*. To get there, scrap your lemons-to-lemonade and silver-linings pep talk and hone in on "teaching kids healthy coping skills and offering safe spaces for them to vent and support their endeavors to find healthy solutions," says Samudio. "In the end, that's what will lead to optimism and what will offer kids a bridge to hope, perseverance, and resilience." Here's how to get there.

Narrate Your Own Optimism, Realistically

Kids are always watching and listening and, honestly, "you can't give your children a sense of optimism if you don't have it yourself," says Samudio. Even such seemingly innocuous utterances as "We're always running late!" and "I'm such a scatterbrain!" can inadvertently showcase how you react to daily setbacks with pessimism. A different approach: Acknowledge mistakes and misfortunes but also how you may be able to sidestep them next time. (Here, the power lies with the

individual, *not* the situation.) Think: "It looks like we're behind schedule. We'll have to leave 10 minutes earlier next time." Of course, "you don't need to model optimistic reactions all of the time," says Samudio. "On the contrary, kids learn from both healthy displays of optimism and pessimism." In short, everything is a teaching tool. For example, say your child wanders in while you're watching a news report on something like a natural disaster or a protest that turned violent. "Be honest about things you're worried about and about what you're

hopeful for," says Samudio. "This helps children see that they can live in a range of feelings about what is happening around them."

Set Kids Up for Small Victories

Real talk: "Kids who've had many positive experiences are happier and more optimistic because they always assume they're going to get more of the same," says Kennedy-Moore. Compare those kids to the ones who've dealt with failures and disappointments, like the child who struggles to naturally jump into a

game of kickball or the one who was the first to sit down during the class spelling bee. "It's much harder for children who haven't had a lot of experience with things turning out well to muster the courage and optimism to try again," says Kennedy-Moore.

To help, parents can create a number of small-risk, small-payoff situations and build from there. These can be physical "risks," like encouraging your little one to go down the slide solo, or more emotional risks, such as suggesting that your anxious remote learner



turn her camera on for just five minutes. “It can even be completing a craft, baking something, or doing a puzzle,” says Frank Sileo, a psychologist and the author of numerous books, including 2017’s *A World of Pausabilities: An Exercise in Mindfulness*. “Think of it as finding everyday ways that can help your child develop a sense of pride or mastery.”

Help Kids Create Positives

A super-simple way to help kids of all ages feel hopeful and optimistic is showing them that they have the power to make a difference in someone else’s life. “Bringing a little sunshine to others is a really powerful type of optimism,” Kennedy-Moore says. “In the world of psychology, we call this self-efficacy. What that means is a child believes that he or she can do things that have an impact.” And during especially turbulent times, that can be incredibly valuable. “Kids right now can feel helpless. And while, no, they can’t solve a pandemic, they can, say, make their isolated grandmother feel better with a picture or drop a surprise at

their friend’s door,” Kennedy-Moore says. “These kid-size ways to take action fuel optimism.”

Get Thankful

There’s a classic study in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, published in 2003, that found that people who kept a gratitude journal wound up feeling more optimistic and better about their lives after just 10 weeks. This exercise works for kids too. “Essentially, keeping a gratitude journal teaches kids mindfulness, which in its simplest terms is about noticing and appreciating positive things in your life,” says Sileo. “And when we take the time to focus on things in life that we’re grateful for, it increases feelings of hope and optimism.” If journal writing isn’t appealing to your kids, you can simply have regularly scheduled time together when you each share what Sileo calls “Big Gs, or gratitudes, and Small Gs.” Think along the lines of family, home, and health as big-hitter Gs and, say, a kiddo’s favorite blanket, watermelon popsicles, and snuggling with your

puppy as important small Gs. “As with any new habit, you need to practice it regularly for the effects to stick,” he says.

Foster Autonomy

Have older kids tackle tasks like making their bed and clearing the table. Put your preschooler in charge of toy cleanup or placing dirty clothes in the hamper. Toddlers? “Try putting a small container of juice and another with a prepared snack at the child’s level in the refrigerator so they can get it by themselves when it’s time to eat,” says Samudio. Why? All of the above builds a child’s sense of autonomy, a key ingredient of optimism. (Both autonomy and competence, it seems, are essential for psychological growth and the development of optimism, notes a 2019 report in the *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*.) “When we offer children appropriate levels of independence and autonomy, they have many opportunities to prove to themselves that they are capable,” Samudio says. “For children, the more they find confidence in themselves, the more they develop an internal sense of control. And having a positive internal sense of control helps them pull from their thoughts and experiences to find optimism.”

Acknowledge Struggles This Way

When kids who lean toward the pessimistic face disappointment, they often shoulder the entirety of blame, believing that they’re destined to fail forever and always, saying things like, “I stink at math!” or “I’m the worst kid on the team!” While your gut instinct is to argue with them or problem-solve, don’t. “They will only dig their heels in harder,” Kennedy-Moore says. Instead, pause and listen. “Let your



child tell you about their struggle and validate the feelings that come with it,” Samudio says. That sounds like, “you’re really disappointed that X didn’t happen,” or “you’re frustrated that Y didn’t turn out like you hoped.” “You get bonus points if you say ‘right now’ or ‘in this situation,’ subtly hitting home that your child’s struggle is temporary,” says Kennedy-Moore, who notes that you should continue describing the feelings you see until you see your child softening. “You’ll notice it in their face and in their body. And then, and only then, can you go into problem-solving,” she says.

Collect Success Stories

“I recommend parents become their kids’ bias biographers,” Kennedy-Moore says. “It’s your job to collect stories of when your kids struggled and then triumphed—and then whip them out whenever they’re needed.” These types of hopeful stories come in handy when a child hits a

stumbling block and starts veering toward pessimism. Such stories sound like, “I remember when you first started swimming and you were afraid to put your face in the water. Now you’re a fish!” Or “Remember when you used to cry before I dropped you at daycare? Now you love being the first one there!” Says Kennedy-Moore: “Here, you’re not only focusing on progress rather than perfection; you’re helping construct a realistic and hopeful narrative for your child about their experiences.”

Allow Kids Space to Process

Kids can get down on themselves. They can feel discouraged. “That doesn’t mean that they are pessimistic kids,” Kennedy-Moore says. “It simply means that they are feeling pessimistic about something specific.” And sometimes the best thing you can do is simply allow your kiddo to mull the situation

over. “We often rush to reframe a negative event because we think letting children experience negative emotions will stop them from being resilient or optimistic,” says Samudio. “But the truth is, *feeling* those emotions and allowing them a healthy outlet can clear space to be motivated to find solutions.”

If you’re thinking, “Yeah, super, I’ll get to teaching optimism once the world stops burning,” know this: “Optimism works no matter one’s life circumstances,” says Samudio. “In fact, some might even argue that people in challenging situations need optimism more than ever.” So for any parent struggling with marginalization in any form, remember: “Optimism isn’t about ignoring the facts or reality,” Samudio says. “It’s about seeing those facts in a different way, with a different lens that allows you to find the bridge from your present circumstances to the life you’re hoping for.” ●

