



Raising an Optimistic Child

AS THE HOLIDAY SEASON APPROACHES, there is pressure for adults and children to feel happy, content and excited about upcoming days and weeks. Although certainly a festive time with friends and family, the holiday season is an opportune time to reflect not only on the season's merriment, but also on children's long-term sense of contentment with their lives. One underlying trait that helps determine a child's contentment involves his or her sense of optimism.

Optimism is generally defined as a disposition to expect the best and view events in a positive light. The benefits and advantages of being optimistic have been demonstrated in many mental health studies. For example, optimists enjoy better health and experience less stress, depression and anxiety. Other studies have shown that optimistic people enjoy more satisfying relationships and have a better mastery of life's challenging situations. They also show resilience in the face of adversity.

While a positive and optimistic attitude is often influenced by inborn personality traits, children can still be taught how to maintain more positive attitudes. Indeed, parents can play a major role

in modeling and teaching positive and optimistic thinking. What can you, as a parent, do to foster optimistic thinking in your children?

Learn to think optimistically and model it for your children daily. When something unexpected or negative happens, think aloud and model positive, yet realistic thinking about the situation. An optimistic viewpoint will tend to evaluate negative events as temporary and not pervasive. Optimistic explanations or ways of handling negative situations also tend to attribute them to external rather than personal causes. Optimists also demonstrate perseverance in the face of adversity and don't catastrophize or get caught up in downward emotional spirals.

It's also important for parents to monitor their own self-talk, which can be unintentionally pessimistic. Children can also be taught that their feelings and responses to negative events are not caused by the events per se, but by the way they think about these events, which is their internal self-talk. Once children can identify their internal self-talk, parents can help point out inaccurate and pessimistic statements ("I will never get a good grade" or "I

am not good at anything") and help them generate alternative, more realistic and positive self-talk. Children need to realize that their thoughts and internal self-talk directly influence their feelings.

You can also teach your child problem-solving skills. When children become anxious over a certain situation, help them learn how to break the problem down to manageable parts. Then guide them in generating alternative solutions to each part of the problem. It is helpful, however, if parents avoid solving certain problems for children as it is in the process of struggling with a situation that children learn how to employ problem-solving and negotiation skills.

All children, like adults, have innate tendencies that steer them toward optimistic or pessimistic views of life. With some help from their parents, however, even the more pessimistic youngsters can learn life skills that will lead them to a happier, healthier and more optimistic adulthood.

Editor's note: Aranda is a licensed psychologist (#PY5983) who specializes in psychological assessments and child and adolescent therapy. More information about her can be found at www.helpingtampafamilies.com.



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