Getting Your Child to See the Glass Half Full

Some of the children that I see have difficulty coping in the face of adversity and stress. Oftentimes, when I place these children in counseling groups, I include other children as role models who exhibit good coping skills. One thing that stands out almost immediately is that the role model children tend to have an optimistic attitude that the other children seem to lack. The child with poor coping skills might lose a soccer game and say, “We stink...we are going to lose every game this season.” While the role model child might say, “We lost because that was a really good team we played and we were missing some of our best players...we may be able to beat them next time.” The role model children share an optimistic attitude and believe that whatever caused them a problem can be changed, and won’t lead to problems in all areas. In contrast, the children with poor coping skills tend to be overly negative, catastrophize a situation, and believe that their problems will last forever and destroy their entire lives.

Dr. Karen Reivich, a Psychologist at the Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania, has completed research on Optimism through a grant funded by the National Institute of Mental Health. According to Dr. Reivich’s findings, optimistic thinkers enjoy better health, report fewer symptoms of depression, are more resilient, do better in school, perform better under pressure, and have increased longevity. People who think optimistically are less likely to deny and avoid problems. They try new strategies when current ones aren’t working. They learn from failure and find meaning in setbacks. In general, they experience less stress and achieve more.

Based on the research of Dr. Reivich, the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) has partnered with the Goldfish company (yes, I am talking about those little fish snacks with the smiley faces on them) to promote the relationship between optimism and positive outcomes in school and life. They have created activities to teach children (ages 5-12) to use optimism to overcome challenges in life. Two activities that have caught my attention that can be played at home include the Happiness Scavenger Hunt (http://www.goldfishsmiles.com/FamilyFun/611) and Silver Lining Games (http://www.goldfishsmiles.com/FamilyFun/612). Feel free to explore the fishful thinking website (http://www.fishfulthinking.com) for other thought provoking and useful games and activities for children.

What else can be done to encourage an optimistic attitude in our children? Elizabeth Scott, M.S. is a wellness coach who runs stress management workshops. The following is a list that was adapted from her recommendations on encouraging and developing optimistic thinking in children:

1. **Explain the Positive Side of Situations:** Help your child to see that there is good and bad in every situation. Use your own experiences throughout your life to give examples of positive outcomes of seemingly negative situations.

2. **Don’t Praise Indiscriminately:** Telling a child everything they do is great does not help them experience real success. Validate your child’s successes, but acknowledge their efforts, even when they are not successful. This way, even if they don’t succeed at something they can look towards their efforts to feel good.

3. **Don’t Use Negative Labels:** Be careful to label the behavior, not the child. When you label a child, such as, “Johnny is our shy child”, what may have been a passing phase, becomes a more permanent identity. It perpetuates a behavior and does not model the very idea that behavior can be changed.
4. **Help Children to be Independent and Experience Success**: Children develop an optimistic attitude by learning to do things for themselves despite challenges. I know at times it is much easier (and quicker) to rush in and do things for your child, but this does not give them the chance to work towards a goal and experience success.

5. **Point Out Their Contributions to Their Accomplishments**: When your child is successful at something, help them see what they did to contribute to it. For example, if they do well on a test, point out how hard you saw them studying and help them to see how hard work pays off. Giving children well deserved credit for their accomplishments helps build self-efficacy and contributes to optimism.

6. **Look Towards the Future**: Show your child how to use things they have learned in the past to meet new goals. If they have experienced a setback, help them to see what they have learned in the situation that can help them in the future.

7. **Help Your Child Move Past Negative Situations by Exploring Them as Opposed to Getting Stuck**: If a negative situation arises, help them to put the situation into perspective and brainstorm alternative solutions, so that it can be seen as one specific situation that does not have to reoccur.

8. **Point Out Past Successes in the Face of failure**: When things go wrong, remind your child of similar situations where things went well, and try to get them to see that things will go well for them again in the future, under different circumstances. For example, if they didn’t play well in a particular sporting event, let them know that everyone has their “off” days, point out previous successes, and let them know that you are sure they will do great next time.

9. **Look For Improvement Opportunities**: When children feel they have some degree of control over a situation, they are more inclined and motivated to change their behavior in such a way to make them more successful. Approach setbacks as a learning experience for what they may do differently next time. Make sure you also acknowledge that there will always be external circumstances that they cannot control.

10. **Make an Example of Yourself**: This is something I state over and over again in all my posts and I cannot stress it enough. When things go wrong in your own life, don’t catastrophize. Instead put things in perspective, understand that “this too shall pass”, and make a plan to move ahead.

Optimism is a critical factor in raising happy children. It guides children to look for meaning in their hardships. It is a resiliency trait that can be taught, practiced, and learned. So, let’s help our children to be optimistic and focus on what they can control so they don’t feel helpless, sad, and anxious. Let’s show our children how to see the glass half full, make lemonade out of lemons, and see that every cloud has a silver lining. Let’s build this resiliency trait into our children so that they persevere in the face of adversity and live happy, successful, and healthy lives.

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