

“Stinking Thinking”

Does your child jump to negative conclusions, overgeneralize, make “should” statements, focus on the negative, or catastrophize situations? Well, if they do, they are not alone. They are exhibiting “stinking thinking”. In nearly every social skills group I run, this is a common theme that needs to be addressed. I started to notice the importance of catching “stinking thinking” a long time ago when I began adding role model children to my social skills groups. These role model children were not any more intelligent and didn’t have any fewer hurdles to overcome than the children who had been referred for social skills training. The one thing that stood out almost immediately was that the children who were struggling tended to think differently. They exhibited “stinking thinking”. The child with “stinking thinking” would lose a soccer game and say, “We are the worst! 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.” In general, the role model children were more optimistic, thought that whatever caused them a problem could be changed and wouldn’t lead to problems in all areas. In contrast, the other children tended to be overly negative, catastrophized situations, and believed that their problems would last forever.

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. Optimists 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. They experience less stress and achieve more.

“Stinking thinking” interferes with optimistic thinking. The negative perceptions that come out of “stinking thinking” lead to poor self-esteem, anxiety, sadness, and anti-social behavior. They are counter-productive to emotional well-being and interfere with the ability to be resilient in the face of adversity. In order to stop “stinking thinking”, here are some of the key things to look out for:

1. **Jumping to Conclusions** – Sometimes a child may come to a conclusion that is not supported by facts or may be in direct contrast to the facts. For example, a child may have trouble with a specific math problem and then summarize, “I can’t do math.” Help them to gather accurate information that contradicts their conclusions. In this situation, you could point out past successes they had with math and what was helpful in their success.
2. **Wearing Blinkers** - This is when several positive things happen, but the child is obsessed with the one negative thing or one failure. For example, the child who does well on a reading and math test, but gets a poor grade on a spelling test and then thinks they are a failure in school. Help your child to see the full picture. Point out and highlight the positive information that they are ignoring. This type of thinking is not so uncommon with adults as well. Sometimes I speak to parents after conferences and they are overly focused on the one thing their child needs to improve, while failing to recognize all the positive things that their child’s teacher had pointed out.
3. **All or Nothing Thinking** – The key words to look out for in all or nothing thinking are “always” and “never”. Once someone uses these words they are most likely using “stinking thinking”. Some examples of this type of thinking are “I will never understand math...I always fail...I will never finish this homework.” Create a general rule that “always” and “never” should not be used because it is just not true (might as well add “I can’t” to that list as well).

4. **Making a Big Deal out of Something** – This is when someone catastrophizes an insignificant situation or negative event. For example, the child who says “My mother picked me up late from school...she doesn’t care about me.” Or, the child who forgot to do one part of their HW and can’t focus on anything else in school because the missing HW becomes a huge crisis. Help your child put these minor setbacks in perspective by using some phrase words or mantras like, “no biggie”, “oh well”, or “so what”.
5. **Making a Little Deal Out of Something** - This is the opposite of the previous problem, but nonetheless, just as dangerous. This is the child who gets a good grade on a test and thinks they did well because the test was easy instead of giving themselves credit for their efforts. Don’t let your child short change themselves. Explain to them that it felt easy to them because they studied hard and hard work pays off.
6. **The World Revolves Around Me** – This is when someone is blind sighted into seeing the bigger picture or other explanations that don’t involve them. For example, the child that walks into a room where people are laughing or whispering and thinks everyone must be laughing or whispering about them. Challenge these thoughts. Help your child to see alternate explanations for people’s behavior that may have nothing to do with them.
7. **The Bad Case of the “Shoulds”** – This is the child who is constantly down on themselves and talking about what they did wrong. Instead of focusing on what was done wrong, refocus them on “next time”. What did they learn from the experience? What could they do in the future to be successful? If you focus on the future and change, than you’re changing negative thinking into positive thinking.
8. **Labeling** – This is a dangerous thing that many children and unfortunately many adults do too. This is the child who fails a test and says, “I’m a failure”. Labels can be very dangerous because who you are is not the same as what you do. Labels don’t assume that things can change, but all behavior can be changed. This is why it is never a good idea to label anyone a “bully” or a “bad” child. Behavior may be negative, but once you label a person, the likelihood of positive change is lessened.

So let’s rid ourselves and our children of “stinking thinking”. Challenge it whenever and wherever you see it. When you’re watching TV shows, movies, or reading stories, see if you can catch the characters exhibiting “stinking thinking”. When you catch it, you can make a game of it by holding your nose, holding up a stop sign, and/or screaming out “Yuck!” Do anything you can to rid yourself and your child of these dangerous, unhelpful thoughts. The more practice we all get at recognizing, catching, and ridding ourselves of “stinking thinking”, the happier and healthier we will all be.

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