

Hope Builders

Equipping Our Kids to Thrive in a Challenging World

Take a look at the clickbait headlines of our major news outlets and consider the words you see pop up most. Words like “grim”, “brutal”, “chilling”. They’re carefully designed to evoke anxiety.

And they’re working.

Mental health challenges are at unprecedented levels among our children. Recent research published by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) shows that anxiety, depression, and self-harm are on the rise. Around 40% of girls and 20% of boys have anxiety. (That’s about 8 girls and 4 boys in every school classroom around the country.) Diagnoses are climbing for children at younger ages. ADHD and autism diagnosis is also on the up.

The pressures of school, social media, and an uncertain future are taking their toll. Throw in political instability, a middle-Eastern war, a Russian/Ukrainian war, and economic pain with high interest rates and inflationary pressure... and it’s a lot.

These are big issues. Some research, however, shows that often it’s the multitude of small issues that accrue until our kids are total stressballs, rather than the big stuff. That is, they’re probably more worried about their best friend forgiving them for that dumb thing they said yesterday, or they’re stressed about the speech they have to give in class, or that weird interaction they had with a new “friend” on Roblox more than they’re worried about climate change and wars. The small things are immediate and close. The big things are often more abstract and distant.

In reality, it’s likely both that are contributing to anxiety and stress in kids.

But amid these challenges, there’s a powerful tool we can equip our kids with; one that inoculates kids against anxiety, takes down depression, and softens stress.

That tool is hope.

Hope, in the psychological sense, isn’t just wishful thinking. It’s not the “Geez, I hope we can pay the grocery bill this week” thinking (for adults) or “Hey, I hope that the kids are nice to me at school today” thinking (for kids). Instead, hope has three key components:

Goals: Having clear goals provides direction and purpose.

Pathways: Believing in one’s ability to find multiple routes to achieve those goals, even when faced with obstacles.

Agency: Having the confidence and self-belief to navigate those pathways and overcome challenges.

Think of it like this: hope is the internal GPS that guides our kids towards a brighter future, even when the road gets bumpy. It’s the belief that they have the power to steer their own course, navigate detours, and ultimately reach their destination.

And our job is to be hope builders.

So, how can we, as parents, become hope builders for our children?

I'm going to make three suggestions to show how we can create hopeful kids. In other words, I'm going to give you a goal to work towards and a pathway to follow. As for the agency part... I believe in you, but ultimately that's going to be up to you.

1. Nurture Goal-Oriented Thinking:

Encourage Exploration: Help your child discover their passions and interests. Expose them to a variety of experiences, from sports and music to art and volunteering.

Set Realistic Goals: Work together to set achievable goals, breaking them down into smaller, manageable steps. Progress is the key word here, because progress builds hope.

2. Cultivate Pathways Thinking:

Problem-Solving Power: Equip your child with problem-solving skills. Figuring out options creates hope and resilience. Teach them to brainstorm solutions, evaluate options, and adapt their approach when needed.

Embrace Mistakes: Normalise setbacks and mistakes as valuable learning experiences. Encourage them to see failures as detours, not dead ends. As a cyclist, a quote I share with my kids regularly is "You've got to love the hills. The hills make you strong!"

Model Flexibility: Show them how you adapt to challenges and find alternative routes to achieve your goals.

3. Boost Agency Thinking:

Encourage Self-Reflection: Whether they fail or succeed, ask them how it felt, what they did to get there, and what they'll do next time. This builds confidence to face the future and chase the goal (and develop focus for improved pathways).

Foster Autonomy: Give them age-appropriate choices and responsibilities. Allow them to make decisions and experience the consequences of their choices (within safe boundaries). This builds self-belief as they accomplish challenges.

Provide Unwavering Support: Let them know you believe in their capabilities, even when they doubt themselves. Be their cheerleader, their sounding board, their safe harbor in the storm.

In a world that often feels overwhelming and uncertain, hope is a beacon of light, guiding our children towards a brighter future. These ideas will work for children of all ages. Adapt them accordingly.

By nurturing their goals, empowering them to find pathways, and fostering their agency, we can equip them with the resilience and optimism they need to thrive. This is how we build hope. Parents need to be hope-builders.



AUTHOR

Dr Justin Coulson

Dr Justin Coulson is a dad to 6 daughters and grandfather to 1 granddaughter. He is the parenting expert and co-host of Channel Nine's Parental Guidance, and he and his wife host Australia's #1 podcast for parents and family: The Happy Families Podcast. He has written 9 books about families and parenting. For further details visit

happyfamilies.com.au.