

Why Parents Should Teach Optimism - And How to Do It - Hey Sigmund

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When it comes to thought processes, one of the most important habits of mind that children can develop is optimism. Children who practise optimistic thinking are more resilient, they are less likely to give up in the face of challenge and they tend to interpret experiences in a way that gives them a sense of control and confidence.

Pessimism, on the other hand, leads to helplessness and withdrawal – *it doesn't matter what I do, it won't work, so there is no point in trying.*

Optimism is not about temperament, it is a habit of thinking that relates to how we interpret events. And it can therefore be taught.

Imagine two children (let's call them Optimistic Olly and Pessimistic Patrick) who both play soccer for the local under 11s team (the Variable Vikings). The team has just lost a game 1-0 due to a defensive error by Olly and Patrick.

For the detached pundit, there are lots of different ways of interpreting this result, that's why sports programmes usually have a panel of experts rather than just one! The Vikings were *unlucky* – they had possession for most of the game and narrowly missed going two goals up in the first half. Or, the Vikings *failed* to stay firm defensively and were punished for not taking their chances.

Despite both being equally involved in the same incident, Olly and Patrick choose different ways of interpreting the experience. When he comes off the pitch, Patrick is upset. He puts his head down and leaves as quickly as possible. In the car on the way home, he tells his dad he wants to stop playing for the Vikings. According to Patrick, it is his fault they lost the match. He is rubbish at soccer and the coach won't pick him for the team again anyway so he might as well stop playing. Pessimistic Patrick's

interpretation of the match does three important things – it personalises (*it was because of me*), globalises (*I am rubbish at soccer*) and catastrophises (*they won't pick me again*). And it leads him to give up.

Optimistic Olly, on the other hand, hangs around with his teammates after the match and talks to the coach. "Bad luck, Olly" they say to him. "We need to practise our finishing and our defensive passes," says the coach, "We could have won that game 2-0." Like Patrick, Olly feels bad about the result and knows he made an error. But in Olly's version of events, the result wasn't all his fault and it isn't all doom and gloom. He asks his dad if they can go to the park after school this week so he can practise his passing: "The team isn't having a great season and we need to win next week."

Olly's optimistic habit of mind leads him to explain events in ways that are specific and that allow for change and future success. Optimism helps children to learn from experience and try again.

So what can parents do to encourage an optimistic outlook?

1. **Be a positive role model.**

Model being optimistic. Monitor the running commentary on life that you present to your children. If children hear lots of optimistic comments, they are more likely to develop this way of thinking themselves. Look for and point out the good side to events and experiences. Offer interpretations of events that are specific, that locate control and influence and that allow for a different outcome next time. Avoid personalising (*I am to blame*), globalising (*I always do everything wrong*) and catastrophizing (*I will always do it wrong*). If you find yourself falling into these habits, try and substitute explanations that are local and specific and which allow for a different outcome next time (*I did this thing wrong because I wasn't concentrating. I will remember to pay more attention next time so I can get it right*). Look on the bright side and find the positive even when things haven't gone well.

2. **Interpret failure as an opportunity.**

Whether things have gone well or badly, the most important question that parents can ask their children is "What will you do differently next time?" Present failure as a natural part of learning that helps us to recognise what we don't yet know or can't yet do. Always say what your child did well before you discuss what they could do better. Help them to self-evaluate: "What went well?" "What would you change if you could?" And encourage your child to identify how s/he can influence future events and to develop a plan of action to effect change.

3. **Encourage children to set their own goals.**

When children are anxious about failing, allow them to set their own goals and work out for themselves how to achieve them. Even if they set the bar really low for themselves, if it is an achievable goal that they accomplish by themselves then they will gain a sense of competence that will lead to them setting a more challenging goal next time. Support them to participate in activities where they will experience success.

4. **Challenge negative explanations.**

There is seldom just one correct answer to the question "Why did that happen?" Encourage children to look all around an issue rather than settling on their first explanation. Pessimistic Patrick's explanation as to why they lost the match is that it was his fault. He is right: he made a mistake. But it is not an adequate explanation for the overall result. If a child is interpreting events negatively, don't contradict them but encourage them to come up with six reasons as to why something happened. Why six? Well, it's quite hard to come up with six personalising, globalising and catastrophizing explanations and there is a good chance that somewhere in there will be one that allows for a locus of control and change. When pressed, for example, Patrick might admit that Olly was also to blame – follow this lead. *What did Olly do that contributed to the error? Is there something you and Olly could practise in training that would make that less likely to happen again? What skills does Olly have that might help strengthen your defence in the next game? When will you get a chance to talk to him about that?*

Teaching optimism is one of the most important things that parents can do to bolster children's emotional wellbeing. How children interpret events connects directly to their self-esteem and how they feel about themselves. A child who believes he has competence and influence, even if he makes mistakes, will have a positive view of himself and of the world and will be much more likely to make the most of opportunities. Pessimistic Patrick's habit of mind is not fixed, it is open to influence (and that is optimism in practice!).





About the Author:

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Anita is a parenting speaker, writer and coach and co-founder of The Positive Parenting Project, a social enterprise which aims to bring the benefits of proven evidence-based parenting strategies to as many parents as possible. She also writes the popular and inspiring [Thinking Parenting](#) blog.

Anita delivers parenting seminars and clinics in businesses across the UK, supporting working parents to find practical solutions to parenting dilemmas and optimise the time they spend with their children. She is a regular speaker at corporate working parents' events and also works one-to-one with families.

Fascinated by children and how they develop, Anita has a talent for helping parents view their children and their own parenting strategies from different angles. She is adamant that there is no such thing as a perfect parent and says her ambition with her own children is simply not to make the same mistakes too often. Anita has two teenage sons.

You can find out more about Anita and read her blog at www.anitacleare.co.uk, and follow her on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#).