



The Bright Side

To raise an optimist, you need to think like one. Here's how to teach your kids to see the glass as half full and the world as a positive place.

BY JACQUELINE FOLEY

of Life

Every night, as my husband, Vince, and I tuck our young sons into bed, there's a little game we play: we each take a turn filling in the sentence "My favourite part of the day was...." Interestingly, it's the simplest things that my kids seem to get the most pleasure from. Zachary, 7, might talk about some joke his friend told him that made him "howl," while Ethan, 4, will tell us excitedly about how he loved riding his bike "100 kilometres fast" to day care that morning.

We started this exercise in an attempt to get the boys to wind down before bed at night, but it has become a daily lesson in optimism – a way of helping our children look at the bright side of life. As parents, we want nothing more for our kids than for them to be

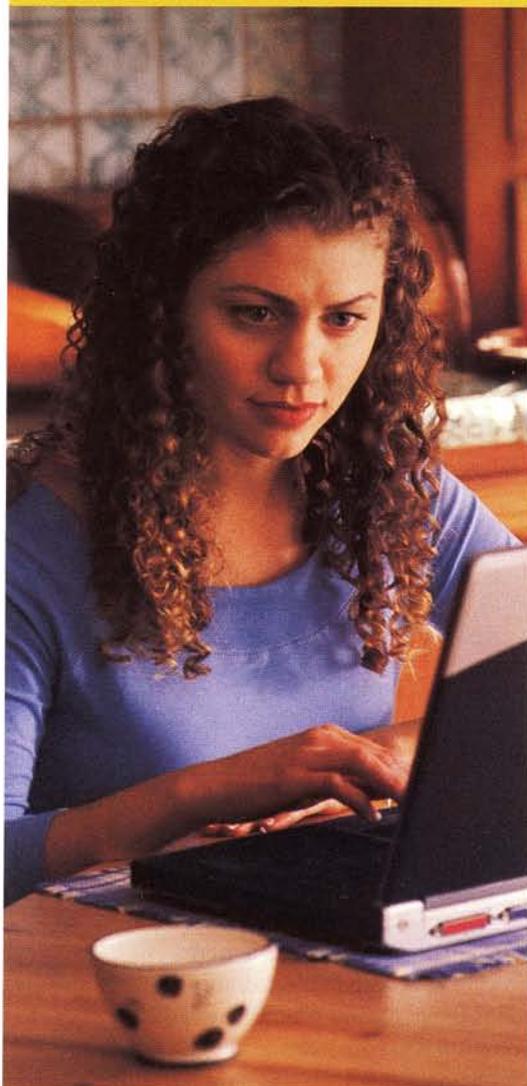
happy in life, and raising an optimist is a great start. Kids who develop an optimistic approach to life tend to bounce back more easily from setbacks, such as getting a bad mark on a test or not making the soccer team. They are also more inclined to meet the world with a positive attitude and to believe that they can succeed. In short, optimists take an active role in creating the life they want.

What makes an optimist?

Most experts agree that we're all born with a basic temperament, or a genetic predisposition, toward happiness or unhappiness. The good news is we can consciously override our inherent nature by changing the way we think and being more positive about our experiences. This means, as parents, we can help our kids become happier by

showing them how to take a more positive approach to life. Because optimism is a learned habit, the earlier you instil it in your kids the better. Though modifying the way your six-year-old approaches life is bound to be easier than shifting the way your 15-year-old thinks, it's never too late to try, says Sharon Carlton, a psychologist in Calgary who specializes in working with children and families. "Teens are more affected by their peers and other outside influences – many of which can be negative," she says. "So changing the way they look at the world requires making sure they're involved in positive activities and surrounded by good role models outside of the home. This allows you to extend your influence beyond what you can accomplish as a parent." Here are ways you can help your kids develop a positive outlook. ►

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➤ ZAP THOSE NEGATIVE THOUGHTS

No matter what their age (or yours), the key to becoming an optimist is having a “positive explanatory style” – that is, being able to put a positive spin on the way events unfold. The first step to achieving this style is to become more aware of our thoughts, says Lucy MacDonald, author of *Learn to Be an Optimist* (Chronicle, 2004), who adds that the most important conversations we have are the ones in our heads. Most of us don’t realize how many negative statements we make to ourselves in a typical day. You can help your kids catch those negative thoughts, then replace them with positive, more realistic ones.

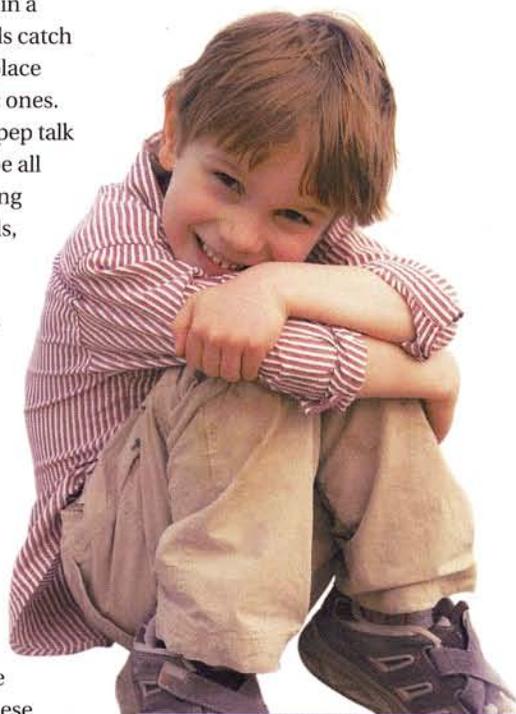
This isn’t about giving kids a pep talk and telling them everything will be all right, says Carlton. It’s about letting your child talk about how she feels, then helping her to look at the situation in a different light. For example, if your daughter fails her math test and the first words out of her mouth are, “I’m so stupid,” resist the urge to tell her she’s not. First, listen to her pain, says Carlton, then tell her you understand how failing a test must be very upsetting for her. Then explore together other, more reasonable reasons why she may have failed the test; perhaps it was really tough, or she may not have studied enough. These steps are key to helping her develop a more positive explanatory style.

➤ LEAD BY EXAMPLE

The way we respond to our own experiences also shapes our children’s beliefs about why success and failure may happen. “Kids are like sponges, always soaking up the things we do and say,” says Carlton.

Anna Van Vugt knows all about being a positive role model. Three years ago, at the age of 41 and when her kids were only seven and five, Anna was diagnosed with breast cancer. “I said to them, ‘Yes, what’s happening to me is horrible, but it’s not the end of the world,’” says Anna. “My kids wanted

promises that I would be OK, but instead I told them that my doctors and I had a good plan, and that if for some reason the cancer came back, then we would just change the plan. I was living with hope, and I wanted my kids to have that hope, too. Now we talk about the fact that we are fortunate because the cancer resulted in some positive changes in our lives.” Most importantly, she quit a stressful full-time job to work at a part-time job that she can arrange around her kids’ schedules. “They love having me home with them.” ▶



Live Better Optimistically

Research supports the notion that **life is better for optimists than for pessimists.** In his book *Learned Optimism* (HarperCollins Canada, 1996), psychologist Martin Seligman writes that “hundreds of studies show that optimists do much better in school and college, at work and on the playing field; that their health is unusually good; and that they age well.” A study released in 2000 by the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn., even suggests that optimists may live longer.

➤ GET INTO THE GRATITUDE HABIT

Learning to see and enjoy life's pleasures is an important part of being an optimist. You and your family can start a journal and record everything you're grateful for or, at night, list things that brought you joy that day. Pauline Povoledo, 35, hopes she's helping her son, Connor, 4, develop a positive view of the world. "I try to teach him to appreciate the little things, whether it's smelling the morning air or having a bath with his baby sister."

➤ GO FOR AN I-CAN-DO-IT ATTITUDE

Being an optimist means believing you can do something and having the perseverance to keep trying. The next time your son complains that he can't make his bed by himself or your daughter whines that she'll "never learn to skate," tell them to "try, try again." You can also discuss what they might change to achieve their goals.

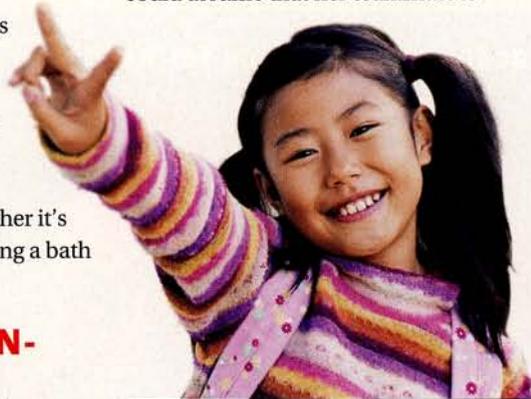
Another way of cultivating that can-do attitude is with positive reinforcement. It's our job as parents to encourage our kids in things beyond the typical expectations, such as winning at soccer or getting high grades, says Beverley Cathcart-Ross, a parent educator in Toronto. Being a good team player or a good friend are equally praiseworthy skills.

➤ TEACH THE POWER OF RESPONSIBILITY

While the key to being an optimist is to believe in our ability to drive our own success, it's equally important to recognize the role we play in our own unhappiness. We can teach our children the power of taking responsibility by helping them accept their mistakes and find ways of turning a bad situation into a good one. This shows them that they can create the change they want in their lives.

Carlton uses an example of a teen who was having difficulty with her basketball team. She was convinced that no one on the team liked her and that they were "just waiting for her to screw up." As a result she performed poorly. Carlton helped the teen examine why she was having these problems and how

her negative attitude might be a contributing factor. Together they came up with ways that she could respond more positively to hurtful situations, such as a teammate not saying hi (she could assume that her teammate is



having a bad day and not take it personally). This helped her to be less defensive and to relax. She became a better player, gained confidence and acted friendlier, which, in turn, led to better relationships with her teammates.

➤ THE BEST THING...

By helping our kids take responsibility for their lives, we're giving them the tools to create their own success. "The beautiful part about optimism," says Carlton, "is that it's a choice."

ON THE NET

For 10 ways to bring a smile to your child's face, visit www.canadianliving.com.

Three Ways to Help Your Kids Think Optimistically

The basis of optimism lies in the way we think about what happens to us. Psychologist Martin Seligman calls this our "explanatory style" and says it develops in childhood. Renowned for his research on how optimism can help protect children against depression, Seligman refers to three ways that kids interpret why an event happens to them: internal versus external; permanent versus temporary; and pervasive versus specific.

Sharon Carlton, a psychologist in Calgary, shows you how to use this approach to help your kids look at negative events in a more optimistic way.

1. INTERNAL VERSUS EXTERNAL

When Jeremy's friend David didn't show up at a planned meeting place, Jeremy began to blame himself (internal), saying

things such as, "David doesn't like me anymore. It's because I'm boring and not popular."

HOW PARENTS CAN HELP: Suggest Jeremy not jump to conclusions by blaming himself; instead, help him come up with other more realistic (external) reasons why this might have happened, such as, "David's parents said he couldn't come" or "David thought you meant the other playground."

2. PERMANENT VERSUS TEMPORARY

When Joey strikes out at a baseball game, he says, "I always strike out. I'll never get a hit." He explains his failure as if it's a (permanent) fact.

HOW PARENTS CAN HELP: Help Joey view his striking out as a short-lived (temporary) incident by focusing not on what just happened but on how he might

change his batting at future games. By suggesting that he practise hitting some balls with his mom or dad before the next game, you are teaching Joey that he has the potential to influence his own performance.

3. PERVERSIVE VERSUS SPECIFIC

When Alison wakes up with a new pimple on her face, she lets it grow even larger in her mind (pervasive), saying, "This zit is disgusting. My face is a complete mess. I'm so ugly."

HOW PARENTS CAN HELP: Encourage Alison to see that the pimple is just a pimple (specific) by reminding her of how her last one went away in three days. Ask her to think about solutions that will make her feel better, such as putting on some coverup and wearing one of her favourite sweaters.