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5 Steps to Raising an Optimistic Child

By Dr. Tony Fiore

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by: **Dr. Tony Fiore**

I had just completed a session with 17-year old Julie who suffered from severe depression. Julie believed she was a total failure and would never be able to change anything in her life. Julie also felt all her shortcomings were her own fault.

Where, I ask myself, did such a young person acquire this negative and fatalistic thinking?

The answer soon became apparent when I invited her parents into the session. They began discussing numerous life events and explaining them in ways that their children were learning. The car, for example, got dented because you can't trust anybody these days; Mom yelled at brother because she was in a bad mood; you can't get ahead in this world unless you know somebody, etc.

As a parent, your own thinking style is always on display and your children are listening intently!

The Importance of Optimism

Why should you want your child to be an optimist? Because, as Dr. Martin Seligman explains: "Pessimism (the opposite of optimism) is an entrenched habit of mind that has sweeping and disastrous consequences: depressed mood, resignation, underachievement and even unexpectedly poor physical health."

Children with optimistic thinking skills are better able to interpret failure, have a stronger sense of personal mastery and are better able to bounce back when things go wrong in their lives.

Because parents are a major contributor to the thinking styles of their children's developing minds, it is important to adhere to the following five steps to ensure healthy mental habits in your children.

How Parents Can Help

5 Steps to Raising an Optimistic Child

Step 1: Learn to think optimistically yourself. What children see and hear indirectly from you as you lead your life and interact with others influences them much more than what you try to 'teach' them.

You can model optimism for your child by incorporating optimistic mental skills into your own way of thinking. This is not easy and does not occur over night. But with practice, almost everyone can learn to think differently about life's events - even parents!

Step 2: Teach your child that there is a connection between how they think and how they feel. You can do this most easily by saying aloud how your own thoughts about adversity create negative feelings in you.

For example, if you are driving your child to school and a driver cuts you off, verbalize the link between your thoughts and feelings by saying something like "I wonder why I'm feeling so angry; I guess I was

saying to myself: 'Now I'm going to be late because the guy in front of me is going so darn slow. If he is going to drive like that he shouldn't drive during rush hour. How rude.'"

Step 3: Create a game called 'thought catching.' This helps your child learn to identify the thoughts that flit across his or her mind at the times they feel worst. These thoughts, although barely noticeable, greatly affect mood and behavior.

For instance, if your child received a poor grade, ask: "When you got your grade, what did you say to yourself?"

Step 4: Teach your child how to evaluate automatic thoughts. This means acknowledging that the things you say to yourself are not necessarily accurate.

For instance, after receiving the poor grade your child may be telling himself he is a failure, he is not as smart as other kids; he will never be able to succeed in school, etc. Many of these self-statements may not be accurate, but they are 'automatic' in that situation.

Step 5: Instruct your child on how to generate more accurate explanations (to themselves) when bad things happen and use them to challenge your child's automatic but inaccurate thoughts. Part of this process involves looking for evidence to the contrary (good grades in the past, success in other life areas, etc).

Another skill to teach your child to help him or her think optimistically is to 'de-catastrophize' the situation - that is - help your child see that the bad event may not be as bad or will not have the adverse consequences imagined. Few things in life are as devastating as we fear, yet we blow them up in our minds.

Parents can influence the thinking styles of their children by modeling the principals of optimistic thinking.

Dr. Tony Fiore is a So. California licensed psychologist, and anger management trainer. His company,

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"EVERYTHING I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT RAISING KIDS..."

By Terry L. Sumerlin

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While it's not entirely true that "everything I need to know about raising kids I learned behind a barber chair," it is true that I've learned some things.

I was reminded of these things, after hearing a sad statement from a conscientious dad. He said that he and his son are now on different paths. I asked how old his son is. "Twelve," he answered. I thought of how close I am to Jon, our 22-year-old son, and how it would hurt me to think we were "on different paths" when he was twelve.

But, I also thought of the many kids who come through our doors and of the many parents who seem to be getting it right. Thus, I've developed sort of a "Barberosophy for Raising Good Kids." Here are a few such "Barberosophies":

1. Be in charge. It doesn't seem possible that a 4-year-old child can control a 40-year-old parent. However, I've seen it happen, and it makes you wonder who is the child and who is the parent. It also makes you wonder if child abuse doesn't sometimes take the form of a parent who won't take charge.
2. Reduce the choices. While this is relative, depending on the age of the child, it seems that children who always have a choice regarding such things as treats and privileges tend to be ungrateful, unhappy and undisciplined. Sometimes it might be more appropriate if the choices are reduced to something I read on a friend's refrigerator: "This ain't Burger King. You take it my way or you don't get it at all."
3. Be careful about showcasing the child. There are far too many kids who receive no positive attention from anyone. There seems to be a growing number of parents, however, who make every interaction between their child and themselves a public event, a look-at-me-and/or-my-child situation. Thus, the child begins to think that the world revolves around him (her).
4. Expect the best. Parents who expect the first haircut to be "a piece of cake" are often rewarded. Similarly, by our words and actions we must always let our kids know we believe in them and expect the best from them. It propels them toward success.

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BARBER–OSOPHY: Though there are no perfect parents or perfect children, it's easy to spot the parents who are genuinely trying to get it right.

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