

Positive Thinking Habits

Have you ever heard of “snow plow parenting”? It’s a term used for parents who watch out for any potential problems their children might meet so they can move in and push those obstacles away before their children even notice. In the short term, these parents are protecting their children from unpleasant moments. But in the long term, are they really doing them a favour?

The reality is that no matter how much we want to protect our children, life will bring them their share of difficulties, disappointments, rejections, losses and pain. The small challenges of childhood are opportunities for parents to coach their children in positive thinking habits that will see them through bigger challenges later on.

How the brain works

The way our brain is wired, we tend to pay more attention to difficulties and negative experiences than to positive ones. If someone criticizes us, we probably give their one negative comment more weight than three compliments we receive. This tendency is even stronger in some children due to their inborn temperament. Children who are inclined to think about what might go wrong can use their awareness to prepare to deal with problems. But when their thoughts get stuck on the negative, they can get so discouraged that they give up. How can parents counter these tendencies and set a positive pattern for life?

An example to follow

Children as young as three imitate the thinking styles of the adults around them. You can model a positive outlook by the way you talk out loud about the difficulties *you* face: “I’m having a hard time putting your new tricycle together, so I’ll just slow down and try again another way.” Stories and books also provide models of how to keep going in the face of setbacks. Try the story of “The Tortoise and the Hare” for young children; older ones may be inspired by biographies about famous people who have overcome hardship.

Step by step

Negative thinking can be triggered when children feel overwhelmed by what they are facing. You can help by showing them how to break a large project or a long-term goal into the many small steps that will lead to success. They may not be able to swim the length of the pool now, but could they hang onto the edge and learn to kick their legs effectively? Let them know you recognize the effort they are putting into the learning. This will take their attention away from the fact they haven’t yet reached the end goal. When you celebrate their achievement at each step on the way, they’ll gain the confidence to try the next level.

Keep the memories alive

Negative thoughts are often expressed with the words: “always,” “never,” “everyone” and “no one.” As in, “He *never* wants to play with me. *Everyone always* makes fun of me.” When you hear such generalizations, it is your cue to put the situation into perspective. As an adult, you can help children remember times in the past when others *did* want to play with them. Even if things aren’t going their way now, there have been good times in the past and there will be good times in the future. Remind them of situations when they stuck with it and succeeded, even though they thought nothing was going right.

Direct attention toward the positive

You can help children get into the habit of focussing on the positive by setting aside a time each day to go over the good moments that happened to them. Emphasize that these moments can be big (“We went to the circus!”) or small (“I liked the noodles at dinner.”). They can all be written down in a “good times diary” that you can look through together when they say, “Nothing good ever happens to me.”

Support perseverance

Positive thinking habits help children overcome discouragement and continue to try, even when the going gets rough. Tell them what Albert Einstein said: “It’s not that I’m so smart, it’s just that I stay with problems longer.”

by Betsy Mann