

Looking for the Good Side

Are you a pessimist or an optimist? When you pour 100 ml of water into a glass that holds 200 ml, is the glass half empty... or half full? When your four year old insists that the sauce on her plate can't touch the noodles, do you call her picky... or say that she really knows what she wants? The words you use to describe your children make a difference to how you feel about their behaviour. Your words influence how you treat them and how they feel about themselves.

If you tend to be a pessimist, replacing negative labels with positive descriptions can open up new possibilities for you and for your children.

New, positive words

Mary Sheedy Kurcinka is the author of *Raising Your Spirited Child* (2006). "Spirited" is the word she uses to describe what other people might call "difficult" children. She suggests finding positive words to describe traits that adults often complain about in children.

- Instead of "stubborn," try "willing to **persist in the face of obstacles**"
- Instead of "demanding," try "holding to **high standards**"
- Instead of "argumentative," try "strongly **committed to principles**"
- Instead of "anxious," try "**careful in new situations**"
- Instead of "unpredictable," try "**flexible**" or "**a creative problem solver**"
- Instead of "bossy," try "gifted with **leadership qualities**"

Positive expectations

Try out this kind of transformation next time you find yourself describing your children's behaviour in negative terms. Does it make you feel better about the situation? More positive language often leads to more positive feelings and an expectation that behaviour will improve. It's like that half full/half empty glass of water. The optimist is more likely to think that there is enough water to quench his thirst. The pessimist, on the other hand, worries that there will never be anything more to drink.

Changing old habits

To change your perspective, you need to apply this positive language in your private thoughts about your children as well as in the way you talk about them to

family, friends, teachers and other care providers. Changing the habit may be hard if you have been using negative labels for a long time, especially if those labels were used on you when you were a child! At first, you may have to pay particular attention to your words and make a conscious effort to turn them around. Like any change in habits, this will get easier after a while. You'll be helped by seeing how it pays off in improved relationships with your children.

When your children hear you say these constructive new words, they too will adopt a sense of their potential strengths. How much better for their self-esteem to hear themselves described as observant of details instead of scatterbrained, as interested in learning instead of nosy or as good at foreseeing possible problems instead of a worrier.

Understanding is not excusing

Using more positive adjectives doesn't mean excusing unacceptable behaviour. Calling your children energetic instead of wild doesn't mean you have to let them treat your sofa like a trampoline. Instead, the new point of view can help you look for situations in which your children's strengths will shine. Energy that is too exuberant in the living room may be just what is needed for success at gymnastics. A talent for expressing emotion could be channelled into drawing or playacting, rather than used for throwing tantrums on the kitchen floor. Once you have identified the good side of a characteristic, you can help your child learn the appropriate times, places and ways to express it.

Traits in adulthood

Often, the character traits that we complain about in children become qualities we admire in adults. Stubborn two year olds can be infuriating, but we want our teenagers to be able to stick to their values and say no to drugs. We respect men and women who continue to work at achieving their goals in spite of setbacks. The challenge for parents is to redirect that stubbornness in the toddler while still affirming the essential quality of persistence. That process begins with new words and a change of attitude.

Keep in mind the words of Isaac Bashevis Singer, American author and Nobel laureate for literature. He wrote, "When I was a little boy, they called me a liar, but now that I am grown up, they call me a writer."

by Betsy Mann