



Upbeat Kids

Five Steps to Positivity

by Tamar Chansky

This is a family master plan for helping both children and adults resist negative thinking.

Step One: Empathize with a Child's Experience

While the desired outcome is to help a child embrace a different point of view of their situation, the first goal is not to come on too strong with an agenda of change. Instead, start from where they are, based on an expressed emotion. Reflect this with words, a hug or a gesture. Thoroughly accepting how a child feels doesn't necessarily imply agreeing or sharing the same view, but it does release them from having to show how bad they feel. So when a child says, "I feel like I'm in jail," resist the urge to say, "Are you crazy?" Rather than try to steer them off their course, go in the direction of their swerve to help direct them back to their best self.

The key is to normalize the experience without minimizing it. Exhibiting too much good cheer means they have no choice but to be grumpy to get their point across. Introduce the idea of choice: "Your thoughts are making you feel really bad. I wonder if there is something different we could do." Don't oppressively correct them with the right answer; it makes a child feel bad for being wrong.

Step Two: Relabel

Instead of being led down a thorny patch lined with terrible impossibilities and accusations, we might steel ourselves to remain calm, get some distance or take our thoughts with a grain of salt. Relabeling begins with noticing a familiar ring to a child's thoughts and distress; like us, they can also learn to recognize when "Mr. Negative" appears. Then they're better prepared for discussion. As parents, when we learn to predict, "Yep, I knew my negative thinking was going to jump to that conclusion," we can decide to choose other interpretations.

Step Three: Specify What Went Wrong

Don't be tempted to try to solve the huge problem initially presented, such as, "I hate my life, everything is terrible, I can't do anything right." The goal is actually much smaller, so teach a child to shrink it by narrowing down from some global form to the specific offending

thought or situation that needs to be addressed. With young children, frame this approach as doing detective work to locate the



source of the problem; with older children, explain that it's usually a triggering event that makes us feel really bad—the straw that broke the camel's back. It's key to helping them know what to do to feel better.

Step Four: Optimize and Rewire

When a child is thinking negatively, their thoughts stall, their strengths and resources lock up, and their energy, motivation and hopefulness are drained. Try different settings or perspectives on the specific problem the child has identified and choose the version or interpretation that works best for them, one that is the least damaging, most accurate and gets their system moving in a new direction.

Step Five: Mobilize to Be the Change

When we can't think our way out of a mood, we can move ourselves out of it. Like picking up the needle on a skipping record and putting it down elsewhere, doing something active helps the brain engage in something enjoyable until our nervous sys-



tem recovers. Thoughts, like a windup toy with its wheels against a wall, can keep spinning fruitlessly in place until manually turned in a new direction.

Redirecting differs from distracting ourself from negative thoughts. Distractions play hide-and-seek with negativity; eventually, it will find us again. The master plan in caring for a child calls for us to first dismantle the power of whatever perspective is bullying them, correctly value ideas and then focus on what matters most. Whether we're accepting or dismissing thoughts that suggest themselves, either way, we're the boss because thoughts have only the power we give them and we are equipped to let them float on by or to amend, correct or replace them.

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