

As a parent, you want to try to raise your child so that they have the best chance to live a purposeful life full of happiness. However, since life has its ups and downs, how do you do that - especially if your child happens to have the "pessimistic gene"?

First, we need to define what it is to be an optimistic child, discuss whether optimism is genetic or not, and how the world looks through the lens of optimism versus pessimism for a child. Then we'll look at how you can teach optimism even if the genetics aren’t on the side of optimism, using your examples and love.

**The Definition of an Optimistic Child**

There is a meme going around the internet regarding optimistic versus pessimistic children. It involves a room full of poop versus a room full of every single imaginable toy possible.

The optimistic child spends a couple hours in the poop room and leaves happy, covered in poop. The pessimist child goes in the toy room that has every imaginable toy and has a horrible time. The pessimistic child leaves the room negative and unimpressed.

This is a very extreme example and not even a true story, but it does clearly show the differences in how most people view optimism versus pessimism. The optimist child can look on the bright side even for a room full of poop, while a pessimist cannot even see the value in a room full of fun toys.

This is kind of a problem in the way we teach children the value of optimism over pessimism. You really don’t have to teach children unrealistic ideals in order to help them become more optimistic and therefore happier.

The truth is, the definition of optimism is basically "the feeling or belief that good things will happen even if it’s not likely." (Dictonary.com) So, in some ways, the ability to be optimistic seems almost unrealistic. However, studies show that the ability to look on the bright side serves people well because they tend to be happier even when things don’t go the way they had hoped. Because of this, there is a lot of value in intentionally raising optimistic children.

**Is Optimism Genetic?**

One of the biggest questions that scientists and parents are asking is whether optimism (and pessimism) is genetic or not. When it comes to childrearing, the age-old question of nature versus nurture often comes up - not in order to dissuade parents from trying to change a negative trait in their child, but more to help with an understanding of how to best teach and guide a child.

Living one’s best life is the goal, and more and more we are discovering that happiness is tied to the ability of the child to be optimistic and thus happy, more so than what is going on in a child’s life.

This is not to say that a child can't become pessimistic when they were not previously, due to what is going on in their life. They can. That’s where the age-old argument of nature versus nurture comes in. Yes, optimism is partially genetic, but it’s also partly nurture. It’s both.

There is a genetic component which has been discovered, and this can affect some people more than others. However, this does not mean that through your example and hard work, you cannot guide your pessimistic child toward more positive thought and actions. Plus, unless you’re going to do genetic testing, you really won’t know if it’s something they have been born with or something they’ve learned. This is especially true if you (or someone the child is around a lot of the time) lean toward a more pessimistic personality.

The best way to approach this as a parent is to understand that if your child is currently behaving in a pessimistic way, it could be genetic. It’s not that they’re trying to be negative or misbehave. They can’t help it until they learn ways to turn their thoughts around and see things in a new way.

Pessimism does not have to be a permanent feature of a child’s personality, whether they have the gene or not. However, if it is genetic, it might be the chief characteristic of their personality until they learn how to be more optimistic. Even then, it might be something they struggle with, but having the tools will make a big difference in their life. Children can learn to be more positive, and you can lead the way. It’ll be a good lesson for them and will help them throughout their life, allowing them to live a happier life overall.

**The Future for an Optimistic Versus a Pessimistic Child**

Even though some measure of pessimistic behavior is genetic, it’s essential to understand that as a parent, you have a lot more power over how their pessimism plays out than you may think. You can demonstrate and model the right way to deal with negative thoughts and situations to make them more positive.

For example, if your child often has the reaction of, "I can’t do this, so why bother trying" when it comes to specific topics like math, sports, their social life, or something else, it’s up to you to try to help them turn those negative thoughts and actions around so that they can experience success. It’s in experiencing success and learning to interpret what success is and feels like, that they get the feeling that they can do "it" - whatever "it" is - and it encourages them to try even if they might not succeed.

The way to help them is to demonstrate and show them how to turn negative thoughts and actions around to make them more positive and assertive. For example, if your child doesn’t study for math because they think it’s too hard and they’re going to fail anyway, getting them a math tutor, setting aside specific times to study math, and showing them how to really buckle down and study will go far in showing them that they can indeed learn the things they are interested in learning given time and expert help.

Pessimism not only affects them today either. When they become adults, it will affect them worse in terms of being able to create and manage a budget, stick to a marriage, raise their kids with purpose, and just living a happy, healthy life.

In fact, even if they experience success in life, that pessimistic behavior and attitude can rip the joy away too. It’s hard to see what is good in life when you can only point out the bad. Pessimistic attitudes and actions lead to less success due to keeping people from even trying, while moving forward in optimism with a plan leads to more success just due to the act of trying.

Whether it’s academics, sports, or social situations, the more your child tries and participates in their life in all areas, the more often they’ll feel successful - even if sometimes it doesn’t work out the way they hoped.

This is not about trying and always getting exactly what you want; it’s about trying and getting some of what you want and learning to be grateful for that fact. After all, doing nothing due to fear of failure isn’t a better result than trying and failing. Because even in defeat, you always learn something that makes next time better.

**The Importance of Being a Role Model**

Like most good parenting, modeling the behavior you want to see in your children works better than telling them not to do the behavior that you don’t want to see. Children need clear examples of how to act in all sorts of situations, and they learn from you first.

Kids Copy Everything

Everything - from how you hold your fork, to the types of food you like, to how optimistic you are about the things happening to you each day - are things kids pick up on and emulate. Even if they don’t fully understand it, they love to copy what you are doing.

Think about how a two or three-year-old will say "thank you" and "please" and other words that you also use when you are dealing with others. Or how a four-year-old will pat the back of an injured playmate just like their mom or dad does for them. Think of some things your child started doing just by watching others around them. That proves that being a role model is crucial for raising an optimistic child.

Modeling Starts Young

Raising a child who is optimistic starts from the age that they begin observing the behavior of people around them and copying it. You probably only notice it when they do something embarrassing in public, but not so much when they’re not being embarrassing.

But don’t worry; even if you’ve not done a great job of modeling the behavior you value in the past, it’s okay. And even if you’re not the most optimistic person yourself, both of you can learn to be more optimistic together. But you must start with yourself first because your child looks to you for the example of how to be human.

Know How Your Behavior Impacts Your Child

To be a role model for your child, it's important to realize how your actions affect them and how important it is, so that you can eliminate your own misdirection and bad habits before working on theirs. Good role models know that they are role models and that the children are watching and copying their every move. As a parent, you’re automatically a role model. You’re the main role model.

As the primary role model for your child, whether you want to be or not, it’s imperative that you realize that this is how your child learns to live a meaningful life, live with honor, integrity, honestly and hope for the future. Your life is the example they will look at to inform their own behavior and life.

Role Models Sometimes Make Mistakes

Even as a role model, you will sometimes make mistakes. However, this is another opportunity for you to become a great role model for your child by demonstrating how you handle making a mistake.

Parents who own up to their mistakes, tell their family and children they are sorry, and seek to make amends for the damage the error caused, are teaching their children valuable lessons that cannot be taught in any other way effectively.

As a parent who recognizes the impact your behavior has on your children right now, you know the unique power you possess to help your child live a happier and more fulfilled life.

Study after study shows that people who are more optimistic report being happier. And if you can improve your child’s outlook on life so that they are more satisfied by merely modeling optimism over pessimism to them, why wouldn’t you do it? It really does make a huge difference.

**How to Change Your Child's Explanatory Style**

As mentioned above, pessimism and optimism are how you view the things that happen to you each day. If you’re pessimistic, you tend to see the worst of any situation and you may not have any hope of a better future due to those types of thoughts. If you're optimistic, you tend to see good things even when it’s not going perfectly, and you imagine a bright future regardless of proof to the contrary.

Because unfettered optimism can cause some kids to make poor choices, it can be tempting not to curb pessimistic explanatory styles, but the fact remains that studies show that children who are more optimistic, as well as adults who are more optimistic, tend to live more fulfilling and happier lives than their pessimistic counterparts.

In short, a child who is optimistic will explain how they see things using positive language and emotions, while a pessimistic child will use negative language and emotions when telling people how they see things. If your child tends to the pessimistic side, you can teach them to turn those thoughts and ideas around to make them more positive.

The pessimistic child may often say things like, "it’s my fault," "I couldn’t help it," "nothing works," "I’ll never be able to do this or that," "I’m bad at math, science, sports," "everyone is mean," "everyone hates me," "it’s impossible," "it’s too hot," and so on. And the worst of all: "That’s just how things are."

They may also get frustrated quickly when they are trying to do new things. For example, if they are trying to learn math, they may get upset during homework and claim through tears that they will never, ever, ever get it. This is the hallmark of the pessimistic child: that whatever it is, it’s not going to work, they can’t figure it out, and there is no use – in their mind.

Usually, this type of attitude has to do with the fact that they feel powerless over themselves and therefore believe they are also helpless in the situations they face in day-to-day life - from getting ready for school, to doing homework, to playing with friends, and more.

Sadly, the negativity will permeate all aspects of life non-stop unless someone intervenes and tries to help guide the child to start seeing the world through a more positive lens. Thankfully, you can start right now by helping your child see things differently once you’re aware of their tendency to be pessimistic about everything.

Don’t Overprotect Your Child

Every child needs to experience overcoming obstacles in order to become more positive about their ability to overcome the barriers. Even if your child currently has a hard time with their emotions over these issues, you can’t prevent them from having roadblocks to overcome.

Allow Your Child to Express Emotions

Being optimistic does not mean that normal emotions cannot be expressed. Everyone feels anger, sadness, and less than fun and happy emotions due to things that happen to them, and that’s fine. That’s normal and it’s okay. Don’t try to change how your child feels, because you can’t.

Be Aware of Your Own Explanatory Style

As your child’s primary role model, typically children learn a lot from you - including how they see the world and the events that happen to you. How you explain things to your family at the dinner table in conversation is just as important as anything that happens to your child, because it informs the child on what is acceptable in terms of talking about life.

Ask Leading Questions

When your child is telling you a story about their day and it sounds overly negative, help them change the words and thoughts. For example, ask them to tell you what was good about their day instead of, "What happened today?" That sets them up to think more about the positive aspects of their day than the negative.

Teach Positive Affirmations

One of the best tools for anyone with a tendency toward negativity is to use positive affirmations. You can find a list of affirmations for kids online, but you can also help your child create their own affirmations that are specific to their needs. For example, if your child is negative every day before school about something, make a positive affirmation for that. "I am well-dressed, clean, fed, and ready to learn."

Show Your Child That There Are Always Multiple Solutions

One reason some children are pessimistic in the way they see their life has to do with believing there is only one way to do something. Sometimes being optimistic has nothing to do with "positivity" but with the truth. So, don’t teach your child to be unrealistic in their optimism; instead, teach them that there are many ways to approach a problem and many solutions to anyone's problem.

Teach Them That They Control Their Reaction

Ask them what they can change about anything that happened, or if it happened again what could they do differently. Analyzing their statements such as, "it’s my fault" with reality might show them how it’s not their fault. And if it is their fault, you can show them how that’s okay too.

Neutral Can Be Better Than Overly Positive Sometimes

When you are teaching your child to use different words to describe their experiences, they don’t always have to be framed in a strictly "positive" way. Sometimes being overly positive can just seem creepy and unrealistic. Instead, simply making a statement of fact that is neither positive nor negative can help make a child feel more optimistic.

Teach Your Child Gratitude

People who are grateful for their life and what they have also tend to be more optimistic. You can teach this by daily prayer, keeping a gratitude journal, or having each person say what they’re grateful for today during a specific time during the day. All those things you do for yourself work for your kids too.

Practice with your child by turning descriptions of what happened, what is happening, and what may happen into neutral and then to positive. Ask leading questions focused on the positive to help frame the discussion. Physically help your child start and keep a gratitude journal, and make it a point to express things in a neutral or positive tone in front of your kids.

**Mistakes Parents Make When Raising Pessimistic Children**

If you know that you have a child who is more pessimistic than most, it can be a little frustrating - especially if you are an optimistic person yourself. You may feel lost knowing how to handle your child’s thoughts and feelings. Avoiding these mistakes when raising a pessimistic child will help.

Overprotecting Your Child

This is worth mentioning again. Overprotecting is something that often starts when children are babies. It usually manifests as micromanaging every single moment of your child’s time. Even a toddler should have time to play without direction. Older children should be responsible for managing their own friendships, and parents should back off as their children grow.

Not Teaching Children Responsibility

This is another aspect of overprotection in some ways. One thing that every single person needs to learn in life is responsibility. Everyone is eventually responsible for their own laundry, chores, homework, and job. If you don’t start teaching them now how these things are their personal responsibility and how to do them, it’ll be hard for them to cope when they are adults.

Being a Helicopter Parent

As your child grows, let them take over more of their own lives. You don’t need to ask them in the 11th grade about their English paper, because it’s their responsibility. They cannot ever learn to do things on their own if you micromanage all their time. Let them learn - and yes, let them fail sometimes too (as is age-appropriate).

Saying Yes Too Much

Another thing that isn’t really that great for kids, even though it seems optimistic at the start, is always saying yes to them about everything. You don’t need to say no without a good reason, but you shouldn’t say yes to everything just to avoid conflict. Being optimistic is about dealing with conflict in a positive way, not living without conflict at all.

Not Helping Your Child Take Smart Risks

A lot of pessimistic people are very risk-averse. That’s one reason they don’t want to try; they see it as pointless. However, if you can show your child a method to evaluate the risk they want to take realistically, then you can show them how to take smart risks in life. For example, while it’s a risk to try out for cheerleading, put it in perspective. The result of failure for that is not being a cheerleader. That’s it.

Treating Smarts as Maturity

Many young children often seem so smart and mature. However, being smart, especially book smart, has absolutely nothing to do with being mature. Maturity only comes with experience, which is why you can guide maturity with an open dialogue about the issues of the day.

Lying about Who We Are as Humans

This might be a hard one for some parents, but it’s important in terms of your child not only accepting other people’s humanity but also their own. You have to decide what is appropriate and what is not for your own child based on their age and your current situation, but sharing that you failed or made a mistake as a child can actually help the child learn from you better.

Not Realizing You’re Your Child’s Main Role Model

You may think of a coach, a teacher, a minister or someone else as a role model for your child but the fact is, the parent who is the same sex as the child is the most significant role model for that child. That can be hard to take sometimes, but it’s the truth. And if you want your child to behave a certain way, you must demonstrate that by your example.

Avoiding Teaching Values and Morals

One way a child can learn to make good decisions is by having something to look to as a guide. Creating a family mission statement about values and morals can go far in helping a child learn to make good decisions.

Fixing Everything for Them

If your child makes a mistake, don’t try to save them from suffering consequences. It can be very tempting, but it won’t teach them how to either be optimistic or to be an upstanding citizen. A good example is that you don’t always need to take books and work to your middle school children if they forgot. And of course, you should never, ever get involved in your child’s friendship fights.

It’s a balance that parents find for their own child, leading them toward more optimistic behavior while also allowing them to be who they are without judgment. Your home should be a safe place for your child to be who they are, but at the same time, it’s okay to guide them toward more positive thoughts and behaviors.

**Things You Can Do to Raise an Optimistic Child**

While nature sometimes wins out, when it comes to nature versus nurture for raising an optimistic child, you still have some power over the situation due to the fact that children respond so well to parent-modeled behavior and input from their parents and other adults in their lives. There are many ways to raise an optimistic child, and if not outright optimistic, at least able to see the good and enjoy the good in life.

Listen More without Judgement

When your child talks to you about their problems, always take the things that they say seriously. Don’t downgrade your child’s emotions in order to teach them optimism. Children have disappointments in life too just as you do. The feelings they feel are just as powerful as yours.

Show Your Feelings

Being optimistic is not about having no feelings that are viewed by others as unfavorable. It’s about having those feelings but being able to see the bright side anyway. For example, if you’re on vacation at the beach but every single day you wake up it’s raining, all day, every day, it’s okay to be upset that this is happening.

But you don’t want to stay there in that negativity. It’s raining, and that is disappointing, but it’s not the end of the world. An optimistic person will find something else to do than what they planned and be happy about that, even while expressing some disappointment about the rain.

Give Affection

Children who receive more affection - including pats on the head, hugs, back rubs, genuine smiles and so forth, tend to be happier and more optimistic. Being ready always with open arms, a smile, a kiss, and a hug goes a long way to help alleviate negative feelings from the outside world.

Role Model Positivity

When you are living your life, both bad things and good things will happen to you. Show your child how to react positively by your behavior when things happen. This isn’t to say that if something bad happens, you should always act positively. It’s okay to have feelings. But if it’s raining and you wanted to go outside and play frisbee, that’s not really a good reason to have a meltdown. Instead, you can be thankful for the rain and find something else better to do today.

Praise Your Child for Success

When your child experiences even small successes, find ways to praise them. For example, if they try out for track team but don’t make it, it’s still worth it to celebrate trying.

Do Not Punish Failure

A hard-won D on a test is still better than getting a D or F when you did not even try. Not trying is not a good thing at all, but trying and failing is not hopeless. If you studied hard but you still didn’t do as well as you wanted to, it’s not the end of the world. You can pass this type of attitude on to your children through your own example of trying and failing.

Be Patient When Teaching Life Skills

Another way you can be an excellent demonstration of optimism to your child is to be very patient when you are teaching them ordinary everyday life skills like potty training, tying their shoes, keeping their area clean, organizing and studying and so forth. No one knows how to do anything until their mom or dad or someone teaches them, and it’s okay not to get it right away.

Give Your Child the Freedom to Play

Don’t schedule every single moment of your child’s life. It’s actually crucial for brain development for your child to get bored. Boredom can lead to creativity. Plus, playing is fun, boosts the immune system, helps release feel-good hormones, and leads to more positivity about life.

Keep Reality Age-Appropriate

While you don’t want to hide everything from your child, you do want them to learn about most of life before they go out on their own. However, you want to try to keep reality age-appropriate. Your four-year-old doesn’t really need to know about bombs in other countries, children starving, or that classrooms get shot up sometimes. While these things are facts of life, let your child lead the discussions and ask questions so that you don’t put more on them than they can handle.

Avoid Using Food as Comfort

It’s very tempting to bribe kids with food for things like potty training and so forth, but it leads to a very unhealthy relationship with food. Instead of teaching them to comfort themselves with food, teach them other methods such as meditation, yoga, and positive affirmations.

Accept That Children Have Problems Too

Just because your child is a child doesn’t mean they have it easy and have no problems. It’s tough being a child sometimes. You’re not used to feeling strong emotions, and life can be confusing. When your child expresses feelings, don’t cut them down and act like kids don’t have problems and real feelings. They do. Show them that it’s normal.

Point Out the Good in Every Situation

When something is not going well, take the time to start pointing out the good things. To use the earlier example, if you are at the beach and it’s raining every day of your vacation, point out the awesome movies you’re getting to see, or the indoor games you’re playing that you don’t normally do, and other aspects of the trip that are still awesome.

Provide Many Happy Events and Occasions for Your Child

Finally, ensure that you provide many happy experiences for your child as part of your family life. Be happy at dinner, in the morning, and during events, and laugh about things when they don’t go exactly as planned. Because remember, it’s not really about everything being perfect. It’s about being optimistic despite things not being perfect. That ability ensures that your child will live a much happier life than someone who cannot do that.

The main point is that every part of your day is a chance to demonstrate positive and optimistic behavior and thoughts to your child. That’s how you teach them. You show them the example, and they will soak it up like a sponge and repeat it.