

EQ
On
Positivity
&
Raising Resourceful
Children



I think I can. I know I can.

This book is designed to be short.

When it's possible, we say things in a very direct way.

The things we say are based on our own detailed
research.

This is one of a series of books produced with the support of the Velux Foundations

At the centre where we work with young children we provide interactive resources for parents, educators and childcare professionals that provide a larger understanding of the material in this book.

THE VELUX FOUNDATIONS

VILLUM FONDEN ✕ VELUX FONDEN

Are you an optimist or a pessimist?

Are you generally positive and able to turn a set-back into an opportunity?

Alternatively, do you tend to be negative seeing the downside of every situation?

When bad things happen or things go wrong, how do you explain it to yourself?

When life brings a pleasant surprise, when you succeed in a task, how do you explain it to yourself?

If your child could hear these explanations what message would you be providing about life and the way the big world works?

Are you an optimist, a pessimist or somewhere in the middle?

It makes sense to describe rational, short-term pessimism as “realism”. Research has shown that, in general, pessimists have a stronger grasp on reality than optimists who can easily delude themselves and even misrepresent the past.

Arguably, the balance that psychologist Martin Seligman calls “the dynamic tension between optimism and pessimism” is the basis of healthy risk assessment.

However, some children actually develop a sense of helplessness. They *learn* it.

It will impact on their performance at school irrespective of how academically capable they actually are. It will

impact on their social success. They become more susceptible to depression.

We will talk about learned helplessness in different ways. In this chapter, we treat helplessness as the opposite of optimism (a faith in positive results that can be gained through personal perseverance).

In the next chapter, we think about helplessness in the sense of believing that people have fixed characteristics (like intelligence) that can't grow. Each of their competences is seen to have upper limits that are predetermined.

After that, we think about something that adults often do that prevents children from learning effectively.



If you are an optimist, your child will be too. If you are a pessimist, things you say and do can teach your child helplessness.

Here are three things that can teach children to feel helpless:-

- 1. The results of early losses and traumas:** Without significant levels of reassurance and a fast change to positive experiences, the seeds of hopelessness can be planted.
- 2. The way their parents (and particularly their mothers) explains events:** A story will illustrate what we mean.

Alexandra and Pavel are redecorating their kitchen. Last night, Pavel painted the door with yellow

gloss paint. Pavel remarked that the paint he'd chosen was particularly difficult to use. It wasn't the brand he had actually been looking for. Nevertheless, he did a good job but the couple agreed that it would be a good idea to give the door a second coat of paint. Alex decides to do it while Pavel is at work. Her daughter, Pavlina – who is eight – watches her do a very poor job. She did not bother to stir the paint before she started.

Alex: *"Damn. Pavel will kill me!"*

Pavlina: *"Daddy told you to stir the paint with the stick."*

Alex: *"I always do things like this. I'm so impatient and always in so much of a hurry. I wanted to have a shower before making dinner. I'm just so stupid."*

Alex has given a pretty disheartening account of her actions and Pavlina is listening carefully.

Alex' account suggests **Permanence** – she repeats the word "always" and defines herself as stupid (as opposed to saying she did something stupid).

There is a suggestion of **Pervasiveness** – Alex refers to doing "things like this".

Alex' account is highly **Personal** and she's very self-critical.

3. The forms of criticism children hear when they fail:

Criticism needs to be personal but it should not suggest Permanence and Pervasiveness. The psychologist Carol Dweck suggests that girls receive more of the wrong type of criticism than boys. Girls mature faster than boys and generally learn to regulate their behavior at an earlier age. In the highly regulated classroom environment (and even during preschool), they may giggle and chat but boys are more boisterous, physically mobile and disruptive. When boys fail a test or fail to perform a task, they are told that it happened because they were not paying attention during the relevant lesson. It is likely that because girls gave the appearance of being more attentive there is a greater chance their failure will be attributed to inability.

Seligman talks about Learned Helplessness and the potential for a pessimist to become an optimist by changing his style of thinking and the way he explains events to himself. Helplessness can be *unlearned*.

Seligman recognizes that before they reach the teenage years, children are naturally optimistic and hopeful. However, in developed countries, rates of anxiety and depression among children have been steadily increasing. Jean Twenge is an American psychology professor who has studied this phenomenon. Studying children aged 9 to 14, Twenge noticed that since the 1960s there has been a steady decline in children's sense of personal control over their fate. People who believe they are in charge of their own fate are less likely to become anxious and depressed than those who

believe that they are victims of circumstances beyond their control.

Twenge has a theory. Nowadays, members of society place far greater emphasis on extrinsic goals than intrinsic goals. The focus on extrinsic goals has become institutionalized.

Showing intrinsic motivation means far more than simply doing something that you find enjoyable. It is a cognitive skill that children should start to develop before they reach school age. The skill is developed when children exercise their natural curiosity through exploratory play.

Extrinsic goals are those that have to do with material rewards and other people's judgments.

Peter Gray is an expert on the evolutionary significance of play. Here is how he explains the problem with focusing on extrinsic goals:

“To the extent that my emotional sense of satisfaction comes from progress toward intrinsic goals, I can control my emotional wellbeing. To the extent that my satisfaction comes from others' judgments and rewards, I have much less control over my emotional state.”

Gray paints a vivid picture of the modern environment in which children grow up:

“Children today spend more hours per day, days per year, and years of their life in school than ever before. More weight is given to tests and grades than ever. Outside of school, children spend more time than ever in settings in which they are directed, protected, catered

to, ranked, judged, and rewarded by adults. In all of these settings adults are in control, *not* children.”

Gray describes fertile territory for the development of pessimism. He describes an environment in which children are more likely to explain misfortune in terms that are Permanent, Pervasive and Personal.

Let’s return to the story about Pavel, Alex and Pavlina.

We’ll introduce another character – Ivaylo. He is Pavlina’s 4-year-old brother. Imagine it was little Ivaylo that decided to help daddy by painting the door. He also painted a fairly large portion of the adjacent walls, made pools of paint on the floor and turned himself bright yellow.

Alex is a pessimist. She is likely to treat the situation as a catastrophe.

In her situation, how would you react?

Do you have a fixed mindset or a growth mindset?

According to Carol Dweck , a *mindset* is a self-perception or “self-theory” that people hold about themselves.

People with a **fixed** mindset believe you either are or aren't good at something, based on your inherent nature. It's just a matter of who you are.

Dweck states that “people believe their basic qualities, like their intelligence or talent, are simply fixed traits.... They spend their time documenting their intelligence or talent instead of developing them. They also believe that talent alone creates success—without effort.”

Walter Mischel is one of the world's greatest cognitive psychologists. Please read the following statement and think about it for a few minutes.

“This is encouraging evidence of the power of the environment to influence characteristics like intelligence. Even if traits like intelligence have large genetic determinants, they are still substantially malleable.”

Mischel encourages us to think of the human body as a library containing thousands of books. The words, paragraphs and chapters that get read depend on an “enormously complex interactions between biological and environmental influences”. Mischel states that “(t)he possibilities are endless and the role of the environment essential”.

Those with a fixed mindset essentially overlook the existence of these “endless possibilities” and fail to take account of the plasticity of the brain.

The wrong type of praise can encourage the development of a fixed mindset. In general, Dweck reveals it is better to praise effort rather than cleverness or accomplishment. Inappropriate praise can lead to an unfortunate pattern of behavior if a child becomes excessively concerned with how smart or talented she is and seeks opportunities to prove that intelligence or talent while avoiding other challenges.

Dweck has drawn the following conclusion on the basis of extensive research: "Praising students' intelligence gives them a short burst of pride, followed by a long string of negative consequences."

Having said this, praise should yield motivation and resilience and there is danger in praising pointless effort or sustained effort that does not result in demonstrable learning.

Younger children should be allowed to try their own approaches or methods even when they appear clumsy. To you, they may seem "wrong" but they may actually achieve what they set out to do even though this differs from your definition of the optimum outcome. Precocious children are going to be "wrong" frequently. Don't tell them but, by all means, intervene when they become discouraged or frustrated. Gently guide them towards a more effective approach.

Some children enjoy learning even when it's hard and they are resilient in the face of obstacles. They have a *growth mindset*. When school children believe they can develop their intelligences and talents, they do just that and don't care how smart they appear. They accept challenges and stick to them.

Let's compare the two mindsets:

With a fixed mindset, you believe “She’s a natural born singer” or “I’m just no good at dancing.”

With a growth mindset, you believe “Anyone can be good at anything. Skill comes only from practice.”

With a **fixed** mindset, you want to hide your flaws so you’re not judged or labeled a failure.

With a **growth** mindset, your flaws are just a TO-DO list of things to improve.

With a **fixed** mindset, you stick with what you know to keep up your confidence.

With a **growth** mindset, you keep up your confidence by always pushing into unfamiliar territory, to make sure you’re always learning.

With a **fixed** mindset, you look inside yourself to find your true passion and purpose, as if this is a hidden inherent quality.

With a **growth** mindset, you commit to mastering valuable skills regardless of mood, knowing passion and purpose come from doing great work, which comes from expertise and experience.

With a **fixed** mindset, failures define you.

With a **growth** mindset, failures are temporary setbacks.

With a **fixed** mindset, it’s all about the outcome. If you fail, you think all the effort was wasted.

With a **growth** mindset, it’s also about the process, so the outcome follows naturally.

You may have decided that as a parent or teacher a growth mindset is the right thing to have. You may have started thinking of examples of parents or teachers demonstrating a fixed mindset. Here is some sound advice from Carol Dweck:

“Let’s legitimize the fixed mindset. Let’s acknowledge that (1) we’re all a mixture of fixed and growth mindsets, (2) we will probably always be, and (3) if we want to move closer to a growth mindset in our thoughts and practices, we need to stay in touch with our fixed-mindset thoughts and deeds. ”

If an organization like Equilibrium tried to create an environment in which the fixed mindset was “banned”, we would simply create false growth mindsets. Instead, those who work with children should look for fixed mindset reactions when we face challenges – anxiety and feelings of defeat or personal incompetence.

Dweck says parents “should teach their children to love challenges, be intrigued by mistakes, enjoy effort and keep on learning.”

Being intrigued by “mistakes” and enjoying effort

Elinor Goldschmeid created the term “heuristic play” to describe how babies and young children explore the properties of objects. They learn and try to do things for themselves by applying what they have learned about an object and what it can be used for. They will probably copy us. Things often go wrong, don’t they? A wooden spoon is great for scooping up water unless it has holes in it.

Hey, mums with babies: Are we putting any ideas in your head? We hope so.

IT'S GOOD TO ENCOUNTER THE EXCEPTIONS TO THE RULE YOU'VE JUST WORKED OUT.

You may have heard about the team-building challenge that involves building a tower using 20 sticks of spaghetti, half a metre of sticky tape, half a metre of string and a single marshmallow that has to be placed on top of the tower. Teams of kindergarten children do better than groups of adults unless those grown-up groups include engineers or architects. Those young children dive straight into the challenge and through trial and error they receive rapid feedback about what works and doesn't work. They use high-speed, heuristic learning.

Hey, mums with preschoolers: Are we putting any ideas in your head? We hope so.

IT'S GOOD TO LEARN BY TRIAL AND ERROR.

How does a “teacher” sound?

Do you know what we mean by “intrinsic motivation”? We used the expression earlier and said it is a cognitive skill that children learn through following their curiosity.

It is a type of motivation that comes from *inside yourself*. You are not motivated by external rewards or the desire to avoid shame or punishment. Rather, you do something because it is *internally* rewarding. It provides satisfaction.

Humans and some other animals spend a great deal of time and energy in exploring and obtaining understanding. Our capacity for intrinsic motivation dictates the extent to which we can continue to explore and learn when there is no foreseeable profit or desired result. We call this curiosity-driven learning.

Intrinsic motivation mechanisms are observed throughout life from an infant's spontaneous exploration of their body and external objects to adults reading novels or conducting research.

You can see that intrinsic motivation is incompatible with a sense of personal helplessness. Helpless people are generally pretty apathetic not curious and questing.

Developmental psychologist Alison Gopnik describes research showing that deliberate teaching can, at least sometimes, reduce the amount that young children learn about an object, because the teaching tends to inhibit them from fully exploring the object themselves. It prevents them from learning any more about it than what the teacher had pointed out.

Do you know how a teacher sounds? The tone? The manner of speaking? Do you ever sound like a teacher? Young children learn to respond to the way a teacher sounds. Those who hear a great deal of instruction can develop a kind of helplessness in the sense that their

capacity for intrinsic motivation is not being used and developed. They become passive recipients of information.

According to Gopnik children “learn the truth by imagining all the ways the world could be and testing those possibilities”. They can’t do this if they hear too much instruction and their experiments are interrupted by someone who sounds like a teacher.

Think of it this way – young children are curious experimenters especially with things they have not encountered before. Adults have, to a great extent, become compliant and orthodox in the sense that we think in terms of the “right way” of using a spoon, the “right way” to tie shoelaces and the “right place” to put used tissues (that, most definitely, are *not* for playing with).

Gopnik says that “our job as parents is not to make a particular kind of child. Instead, our job is to provide a protected space of love, safety, and stability in which children of many unpredictable kinds can flourish. Our job is not to shape our children’s minds; it’s to let those minds explore all the possibilities that the world allows. We can’t make children learn, but we can let them learn.”



Can you change the world?

There is an illustrated book for young children that was first published in the USA in 1930. It's called 'The Little Engine that (Though it) Could'.

A train delivering toys to boys and girls on the opposite side of a mountain breaks down. Every other train, big and small, passes by and refuses to help but not the smallest engine of all. He takes the heavy load and starts up the mountain...."I think I can. I think I can..."

The book provides a lesson in *self-efficacy*.

Self-efficacy is a person's belief in his or her ability to succeed in a particular situation. Psychologist Albert Bandura says this belief determines how people feel, think, behave and motivate themselves.

We have been looking at how children learn helplessness. Pessimism is infectious. The wrong kind of praise creates a fixed mindset. Too much instruction kills curiosity and compromises the cognitive skill of intrinsic motivation.

Let's consider two of the main sources of self-efficacy.

According to Bandura, self-efficacy can develop through "mastery experiences". Performing a task successfully strengthens self-efficacy. Failing to adequately deal with a task can undermine or reduce self-efficacy.

Naturally curious and adventurous, young children operate in the realm of trial and error.

You're doing it wrong.

That's not the way to do it.

Let mummy do it.

The above statements do not belong in the realm of trial and error.

Trial and error is a sound technique on the road to mastery. Even for adults.

Witnessing other people successfully completing a task is another important source of self-efficacy. Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky explains the learning potential of problem solving under the guidance of adults or in collaboration with more competent peers. He views interacting with peers as an effective way of developing skills and strategies.

A little boy in the company of “big boys” will watch intently while earnestly recognizing the comparative inefficiency of his current approaches. It isn’t really a question of their approach being “right” and his being “wrong”. Their approach has been tried and tested. It is known to succeed.

“If children feel safe, they can take risks, ask questions, make mistakes, learn to trust, share their feelings, and grow.”

(Alfie Kohn, educationalist)

Being “wrong” is not a pleasant feeling for young explorers.

The problem with parenting goals

Here is a long quote from Alison Gopnik:

“To be a parent—to care for a child—is to be part of a profound and unique human relationship, to engage in a particular kind of love. ... Love doesn’t have *goals* or blueprints, but it does have a purpose. The purpose of love is not to change the people we love, but to give them what they need to thrive. Love’s purpose is not to shape our beloved’s destiny, but to help them shape their own. It isn’t to show them the way, but to help them find a path for themselves, even if the path they take isn’t one we would choose for ourselves, or even one we would choose for them. ... Loving children doesn’t give them a destination; it gives them sustenance for the journey.”

Peter Gray wrote a review of Gopnik’s book that the above quote is taken from. According to Gray, the word “parent” is “a wonderful noun, referring to a partner in a particular kind of *relationship*; but it’s a terrible verb when used, as it so often is, to refer to what is perceived as a particular kind of *work*.”

The Alison Gopnik quotation was taken from her book ‘The Gardener and the Carpenter’.

As a parent, are you a gardener or a carpenter?

Gopnik argues that although caring for children is immensely important, the goal should not be to try to shape them so that they turn out in a certain way (like a carpenter shaping wood). According to Gopnik when we act like a gardener “we create a protected and nurturing space for plants to flourish. “

When you think about it, gardening demands supreme optimism and faith in your child as an autonomous

individual. Trying to dictate outcomes for your child shows a lack of faith in serendipity. The burden being passed to the child is a fear of failure and difficulty in dealing with big choices and uncertainty.

Psychologist Madeline Levine, says there are three ways of unwittingly causing psychological harm to young children -

1. When we do for our children what they can *already* do for themselves;
2. When we do for our children what they can *almost* do for themselves; and
3. When our parenting behaviour is motivated by our own egos.

By doing these things, we deprive our children of the opportunity to be creative, to problem solve, to develop coping skills and to build resilience.

This parental behavior provides a child with rather soul-crushing news – you can't do any of this without me.

Even at pre-school age, children need the freedom to figure things out for themselves. Parents should provide an environment in which it's safe to do so.

Adult agendas and their impact on play

Let's share a thought-experiment.

Imagine a room – a meeting place. It contains 8 adults and 12 children under the age of 6.

The event is described as a “play group”.

The rhythm is stop-start, stop-start. Staccato. There is a prevailing sense of tension.

Where do these things come from?

Want a clue?...Not from the children.

The adults have expectations and agendas regarding the activities and behavior of their own child / children and the way that events should unfold for the group.

These expectations are unlikely to be altogether compatible with one another. They are not compatible with the natural tendencies of the children.

The tentative, introverted child is encouraged to join in.

Gender-appropriate behavior is actively encouraged.

Adults pounce the moment there is a disagreement.

Objects are distributed in order to be “used properly” and in accordance with their normal functions.

The adults suggest their favorite games. “I saw this on Google. It helps children learn numbers.”

They instruct, interfere and intervene.

Why? What provokes them to do this?

Perhaps Jean Liedloff provides a clue when she says that “we are born with our instincts” but cultural forces train us

to doubt them or to suspect them. It is a type of modern neurosis.

Psychologist Peter Gray talks about an instinct to play. He argues that children become self-reliant if they are provided freedom to learn through a process of self-education.

Are we, as adults, suspicious of our children's instinct to play? Are we skeptical of their ability to teach themselves?

I think that each and every one of us would be reluctant to answer "yes" to either of the questions. Deep inside we aren't suspicious or skeptical? Not in our hearts.

However, we feel pressurized.

Pressurized to instruct, interfere and intervene.

Why?

As stated earlier, Alison Gopnik refers to the modern phenomenon we call "parenting". It sounds like a type of profession, doesn't it? It is for this precise reason that Peter Gray objects to its use.

Sociology professor Frank Furedi has written a book that refers to the result of this new perspective on the roles of mums and dads. His book is called 'Paranoid Parenting' and he suggests that ignoring the "experts" may be best for your child.

Furedi would undoubtedly agree with Peter Gray who has the following to say on the subject of "parenting" –

"If we define parenting as caregiving to one's child, then the best parent is not the one who parents most, and

certainly not the one who parents least, but the one who parents just the right amount. “

In his book ‘A Good Enough Parent’, Bruno Bettelheim puts it this way:

“In order to raise a child well one ought not to try to be a perfect parent, as much as one should not expect one’s child to be, or to become, a perfect individual. Perfection is not within the grasp of ordinary human beings. Efforts to attain it typically interfere with that lenient response to the imperfections of others, including those of one’s child, which alone make good human relations possible.”

In his 1969 book ‘Parents and Teenagers’ Dr. Haim Ginott used the expression “helicopter parent” to refer to the type of parent that teenagers described as hovering over them all the time. These are parents who take too much responsibility for the experiences of their children. They are over-controlling in the way they push for success and overprotective in the way they try to eliminate risk or failure.

What are the potential consequences of trying to be the perfect parent?

Decreased confidence and self-esteem

When parents are too heavily involved in managing the lives of their children, they provide the message that

they do not trust their children to make their own decisions.

Undeveloped coping skills

If parents are always there to take control, how do children ever learn to cope with loss, disappointment or failure?

Increased anxiety

Psychologists now know that personal wellbeing depends on an individual having a strong sense of three things -

Personal Autonomy: feeling that you have control over your own actions.

Personal Competence: having a perception that you possess adequate ability.

Relatedness to Others: having a sense that you belong (to a group, within a social scenario, as part of a social movement)

When parents are over-controlling and overprotective it can prevent children from developing a full sense of "Self".

Sense of entitlement

Children who have always had their social engagements, school life and recreation and hobbies totally organized by their parents to best fit their needs can become accustomed to having experiences *provided*. They can grow to believe that they can always get what they need or want.

Undeveloped life skills

Parents who do things for their children even when they are mentally and physically capable of doing the task, prevent their children from mastering important skills.

Here are the defining characteristics of good-enough parents as defined by Peter Gray –

Good enough parents do not strive to be perfect parents and do not expect perfection from their children.

Good enough parents respect their children and try to understand them for who they are.

Good enough parents are more concerned for the child's experience of childhood than with the child's future as an adult.

Good enough parents provide the help that their children need and want, but not more than they need or want.

The primary tools of good enough parenting are conscious reflection, maturity, and empathy.

Good enough parents are confident that their good enough parenting is good enough.

YOUR “JOB” IS TO BE GOOD ENOUGH