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Emotional Well-Being in Child Care

Fostering Optimism in Young Children

by Darlene Kordich Hall

Joey is 5. He is a sweet, bright little boy who is timid and shy. He gives up easily when faced with the smallest challenge. Even when things seem to be going well, his gloomy small voice can be heard saying, "I can't do it. I'm stupid." His mother, a quiet nervous woman, expresses sincere worry about Joey. "I don't know what to do," she says, with exasperation in her voice. "He's just like his dad; I think it's in his genes."

Do you know children like Joey? Their gloominess, passivity and lack of perseverance cause us to feel concern about how they will fare as they go through life. They are difficult children to work with and to motivate, and even harder for us to understand.

How we typically explain our positive and negative experiences — our explanatory style — has been shown to be a powerful predictor of our ability to successfully handle challenge and adversity. We know that optimism (as opposed to its less sunny cousin, pessimism) is associated with resiliency in both children and adults. An optimistic explanatory style is a major protector against depression (Gladstone & Kaslow, 1995; Hillsman & Garber, 1995; Seligman, 1991; Shatté, 1998) and pessimism appears to be related to poorer health and decreased longevity (Maruta, Colligan, Malinchoc, & Offord, 2000).

Because our explanatory styles begin to form at an early age, child care professionals who interact with children daily are in a unique position to influence their development and thereby promote resiliency.

Despite the importance of explanatory styles as predictors of positive outcomes in children, little attention has been paid to the role of explanatory models in most prevention and health promotion initiatives aimed at increasing resiliency in children (Garmezy, 1991; Luthar & Ziegler, 1991; Werner, 1993). Instead, our efforts have focused on developing academic readiness (e.g., Head Start), building self-esteem, promoting problem-solving, or improving the parent-child relationship (e.g., home visitation programs).

While all of these areas are important and have shown some successes, they do not automatically lead to emotional well-being. Many "resilient" survivors of adverse childhood experiences,

despite all outward signs of success, report feeling as if it might all collapse someday. This sense of foreboding is a sure sign of a firmly imbedded pessimistic world view. Without changing habitual negative beliefs about successes and obstacles, the individual is more likely to become easily stressed, anxious, unhappy and ultimately depressed (Seligman, 1991). Thus, child care professionals need to find ways to help children (and the adults around them) deal with their inner response to life experiences, in particular the explanations they have about negative events in their lives.

Most of us believe that "bad events" themselves cause us to act in certain ways. In actual fact, there is a step in between the event and our actions — our beliefs. Albert Ellis (1962) developed the ABC model to describe what happens to us when we face difficulties. He theorized that when an adversity (A) occurs, our beliefs (B) about that experience act as an intermediary between the event and our feelings and actions, i.e., consequences (C).

Here is an example of how the ABC model works:

Mary and Susan are co-workers who were laid off from their jobs at the same company (A). Mary found herself wondering whether she was singled out in some way because she was a sole support parent. She started blaming herself and feeling inadequate (B). "I probably did something stupid because I'm always so tired—maybe I just can't do this job after all." "I can't seem to do anything right these days." Mary began to withdraw from friends, started eating more and became very

“down in the dumps” (C). She worried that she and her little girl would end up on the streets because the layoff would become permanent. Mary even began to question her parenting (B). When she was called back to work three months later, she returned reluctantly. She feared that she might not be able to cope with such a “stressful” job and that she was now overweight and couldn’t fit into any of her work clothes (C).

Susan, on the other hand, reacted with some initial shock and anger. “Why me? I’m sure I have more seniority than some of the people they retained” (B). She began to wonder whether her work performance was at issue, but decided she had done a reasonable job with all of her assignments (B). So she called the company and found out about their selection criteria as well as the company’s cash flow problems (the real reason for the lay-offs). She became angry at the company and realized that she was not to blame for the situation (B). Although she was worried about her finances, she told herself that “cash flow problems usually clear up in a short time” (B). She called her child’s school and offered to volunteer. Eventually the school offered her a few hours work doing lunchtime supervision and office help. When the company called her back to work, she accepted readily, feeling that she had grown professionally and personally (C).

From these examples, you can see that the consequences (feelings and actions) of a given event — in this case the lay-off (A) — can be radically different depending on the person’s beliefs about the cause and ramifications of that situation. Mary’s pessimistic explanations (B) caused her to ruminate and become miserable, and the long-term effects on her emotional and physical health were devastating (C). Susan adopted realistically optimistic thinking (B) and felt she actually gained something (C) from the adversity.

Both Susan and Mary likely developed these characteristic belief

patterns early in their lives. By approximately eight years of age, a child has already developed a preferred mode of explanation. Even by the age of 2 to 3 years, children are able to mimic the explanatory styles of their primary caregivers (Seligman, Reivich, Jaycox, & Gillham, 1995).

Seligman suggested that children develop their explanatory styles from three sources:

- their primary caregivers (e.g., watching their mothers explain why bad things happen);
- the manner in which children are criticized by adults for wrongdoings, failures, or negative events (e.g., the child being told he, rather than his behaviour, is bad; being inappropriately blamed for adult problems, etc.);
- the nature of the negative events or crises themselves (e.g., if negative events occur and things do not improve, then a sense of hopelessness prevails (Seligman, 1991).

If our explanatory styles are formed at such an early age and affect so many areas of our functioning, are we destined to fail if we are pessimists? Fortunately, there is good news about explanatory styles. Mounting evidence suggests that they can be altered. Studies have shown that school-age children benefit from cognitive behavioural programs that teach children about their explanatory styles (Shatté, Reivich, Gillham & Seligman, 1998), and those at greatest risk for pessimism and depression benefit the most. Such children become less pessimistic, begin to persevere, and feel less anxious in school and social situations. Similar work and results were found in programs working with adolescents, college students, parents, teachers and adults in employment settings (Shatté, 1998; Stark et al., 1998).

While the explanatory styles and cognitions of school age children and adults can be directly affected by training, we know that younger children are not developmentally capable of “thinking about their



thinking.” However, they do learn from what they see and hear others doing and saying around them. So, what can child care professionals do to assist younger children develop a more optimistic perspective at the point that they are developing their own world view and explanatory style?

Martin Seligman, in *The Optimistic Child*, makes several suggestions for helping young children in this regard. He believes that caregivers should assist children by providing them with opportunities to:

- 1) experience true mastery;
- 2) gain a perspective of “positivity”; and
- 3) have positive explanatory styles modelled by the adults around them.

Opportunities for Mastery

Seligman points out that mastery is the bedrock on which an explanatory style is built. Children need to learn that they can exert control on their world through their actions. When a child’s actions produce no response, or worse, inconsistent responses from others, the child learns that his actions produce no predictable outcomes. In response, the child is likely to become passive. If the situation becomes chronic and pervasive, the child may become depressed and hopeless.

For a sense of mastery and control to develop, the child must see that outcomes are contingent upon actions. Early childhood educators are already well-trained in specific methods to promote children's sense of mastery, so only a reminder of some specific strategies follows:

- Break down activities into small steps to encourage mastery and reduce failure and frustration.
- Offer choices, whenever appropriate, to increase the child's sense of control by providing clear structure and limited options.
- Provide many opportunities for outcomes to be contingent on the child's behaviour. For example, speak in response to what the child says rather than speaking first, select toys that do something in response to the child's appropriate actions, rather than choosing toys that allow the child to be passive, etc.
- Promote the child's active involvement in play-based activities and role playing as opposed to more passive formal educational activities.
- Signal ahead to the child, whenever possible, that unwanted consequences (natural or imposed) will occur unless he changes the behaviour. Help the child make the connection between feelings, actions and outcomes. In this way the child learns that it is his inappropriate behaviour that produces negative consequences, not being a "bad child."
- Helpful criticism is best directed at a behaviour, not at a person.
- Support the child and show faith in the child's ability to resolve and learn workable strategies.

Opportunities for Developing a Positive Perspective

If mastery is related to a child's actions, "positivity" (a positive perspective on daily life) is related to the way the child *feels* about his actions, especially "good" events. When praise and other positive feedback are offered indiscriminately, the child learns that good events are uncontrollable. The child quickly learns that no matter what he does or

doesn't do, rewards come and go; why bother trying. Thus, while affection, love and warmth should always be provided unconditionally, praise should be offered sincerely and conditionally for a specific job well done. Helping the child acknowledge his/her own achievements ("You must be proud of yourself"), rather than seeking approval of others ("I like what you did") also promotes positivity and mastery.

We also need to find ways to increase the number of positive thoughts that the child experiences in relationship to negative ones. Children need to be helped to identify positive things that have happened to them each day. Caregivers need to ensure that the child has more positive interactions with them and their peers, rather than negative, rejecting or critical exchanges. This type of review is especially beneficial just before sleep or rest times. In that way, children go to sleep or relax with positive feelings and thoughts in their heads. This helps the child gain a positive perspective or appraisal of daily life.

Modelling an Optimistic Explanatory Style

Child care professionals, as primary caregivers for an increasing number of children, can also model a positive explanatory style and the actions that follow. We know that young children learn through social modelling, rather than didactic approaches to teaching-learning, so day-to-day interactions in a child care centre offer an ideal environment for this learning.

However, for us to model optimistic beliefs and explanations, we need to learn about our own habitual ways of responding. To do that requires an understanding of the elements of an optimistic or pessimistic style and the "scripts" or "self-talk" that characterize each of them. There are three components of explanatory style — permanence, pervasiveness and personalization (Seligman, 1991).

Permanence

Our explanations for events can be *permanent* or *temporary*. People who are pessimistic tend to see bad events

as *permanent*, rather than as temporary set backs. Let's go back to the example of Mary and Susan. Mary saw her situation as potentially ruinous and feared it would mean the loss of her job (permanent); her thoughts are characteristic of a pessimistic outlook. Susan, however, believed that her company's cash flow problems would not last long (temporary), which is a more optimistic stance. In addition to different beliefs about bad events, pessimists tend to see good events differently from optimists as well. Pessimists believe good times will be fleeting, while optimists see them as being more permanent.

Pervasiveness

In addition to the dimension of permanence, a person's belief about how *pervasive*, from *universal* to *specific*, an event will be is also crucial. Being pessimistic means seeing negative events as more global in scope, and involving more areas in one's life. Those with optimistic thoughts tend to characterize negative events as more specific and limited to only one or two specific areas. Again, if we return to Mary and Susan, we find that Mary's negative beliefs spread from the job situation to other areas of her functioning, including her parenting and even her appearance. Susan, in contrast, was able to contain her beliefs about the lay off to the work situation (specific). For good events, these belief patterns are reversed, so that pessimists believe nice things will be limited, but optimists are more likely to see them as pervasive.

Personalization

One's beliefs about one's own role or responsibility for an event, or level of *personalization*, contributes to one's explanatory style. Explanations which attribute the cause of bad events to oneself (*internal*) are more typically pessimistic, while those which attribute the cause to others or to outside forces (*external*) are decidedly more optimistic. For good events, the patterns are again reversed. The pessimist is likely to see the cause of good events to be outside himself (*external*), but an optimist would tend to attribute positive outcomes to himself (*internal*).

Thus, the pessimist blames herself when things go wrong and gives herself virtually no credit when things go well. Phrases like Mary's are heard all too often: "I probably did something stupid because I am always so tired;" "I can't seem to do anything right." Susan, by contrast, blames her employer rather than herself. Thus, she feels better about the situation and is able to remain depression-free and active.

The dimensions of permanence and pervasiveness determine what you are likely to *do* about your situation, while personalization contributes to how you will *feel* about the events (Seligman, 1991). Hopelessness emerges when one views negative experiences as permanent as well as all-encompassing.

Optimism is not the same as wearing rose-coloured glasses. Optimism is flexible and realistic, depending on the situation. We need to be able to realistically assess our own level of responsibility for events. The cause of any situation is rarely the full responsibility of just one person. Being "realistically" optimistic doesn't mean abdicating responsibility or blaming others for one's own problems.

As well, there are times when optimism is not the best strategy for dealing with certain life events. Sometimes, pessimism is not only justified, but is the best alternative. Where the risks are high, pessimism may be the most prudent course. If, however, the risks are low, then optimism is usually the best cognitive strategy. For example, if a bus driver sees a motorist ahead behaving erratically, we wish him to act as if he believed that the worst could happen any moment (a global belief) and as if everything were dependent on him (an internal personalization) so that he will take swift evasive action. On the other hand, if the risks are low, as in applying for a job or joining a sports team, then optimism is clearly the best strategy (Seligman, 1991).

Examining Your Explanatory Style

To examine your own explanatory style, try keeping a diary for a day or so. Record some of the unpleasant experiences (A) you had. Then write



down the beliefs (B) and self-talk you engaged in during those encounters. Finally, write down the responses and feelings you had, i.e., the consequences (C).

Ask yourself how your actions might have been different if you had changed your explanatory style for that event. Do you have a negative or a positive explanatory style? Self-reflection might help you become more aware of alternatives to the way you may now think about life events.

"Disputing" any negative thoughts in the future can help you to change a negative or pessimistic explanatory style. Part of our job in assisting children with their emerging explanatory style is modelling or showing them how to dispute negative thoughts — i.e., to argue with themselves about how they think of themselves. We also need to help them "decatastrophize" their explanations by reducing the permanency and pervasiveness of those beliefs (Seligman, 1991; Seligman et al., 1995).

To help children become more resilient requires that we become more aware of our own beliefs and behaviours. Self-awareness allows us to provide children with opportunities to develop control and mastery, and to adopt a more positive perspective (positivity).

Below are a few ideas for activities that could encourage children to develop a more realistically optimistic explanatory style.

1) In peer conflict situations, after discussing the participants' feelings and what the consequences might be, add a step by discussing what the children wish the outcome would be and how they can make this happen. Avoid judging, blaming or moralizing. Emphasize the choices and options both children have. Remember to admire *their* solutions.

2) Observe children's role play and support the child's elaboration of challenging situations. e.g., "What else could you do?" "How did you figure that out?"

3) Post "positive" pictures. They can convey simple messages, e.g., help others, give compliments, let someone go first, be polite, care for animals and living things, share-a-toy, give a picture to someone, etc. Acknowledge when you see this happening and point out the positive consequences for the child and others.

4) Read stories and create puppet plays which externalize the thoughts that the characters might be having in regard to negative and positive situations.

5) Create dolls with different explanatory styles and emotional expressions e.g., Gus (who is usually gloomy), Charlie (who is often cheerful), Hanna (who seems happy), Susan (who frequently sulks), etc. Introduce them into daily life with the children and use them to discuss or enact challenging situations and possible outcomes.

As children spend more of their early years being cared for by others outside of the home, their caregivers have a responsibility to assist them, in partnership with their parents, to acquire skills for coping with life's stresses, to persevere and grow. Child care professionals can play a key role in this process. To do that, we need to remember the importance of children's own internal resources. Children actively construct meaning about themselves and their everyday world

from interactions with caregivers. Our job is to see that Joey, and all of the other children in our care, are surrounded by positivity, by plenty of opportunities for mastery, and most importantly, by caregivers whose day-to-day interactions signal their own optimistic explanatory style.

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Staying Hopeful At A Difficult Time

As Darlene Kordich Hall describes in the previous article, how we talk to ourselves about our work affects how we feel about it. If we perceive a negative interaction with a child as our fault or as unavoidable, or if we say to ourselves, "That's so typical. Things never go well," we are more likely to feel hopeless about doing anything to make things better. A different kind of "self-talk" — such as saying to ourselves "This child is very upset. My job can be so challenging" — can lead to very different feelings about the exact same interaction.

How can understanding our own self-talk and our own feelings help children develop more positive self-talk of their own? In the following story, a frontline child care worker, Chantal Larabie, tells us her thoughts and feelings about working with a child and his family. As you read her story, imagine how you might have felt if you were in Chantal's shoes and what you might have "said" to yourself about your situation. How does Chantal's own thinking (and feeling) about the problems she is facing help the child in her care?

A Story From The Field

by Chantal Larabie

Nine months ago I accepted a position at a downtown centre in the school-age room. I was the only full-time staff member of an off-site program. I had no idea what challenges I was about to face.

This school-age program had gone through many supply teachers and all of the children, one child in particular, made it clear to me that I was not expected to last longer than a month.

During that month, this particular child showed me how angry and frustrated he was through every form of aggression, including physically attacking me and the other children, and destroying materials in the room. When I tried to speak to his mother about these behaviours and my concerns, she called me a liar in front of her son. This made our relationship even worse than it was already. I was very discouraged about going to work and especially about dealing with this child.

I began to seek outside help from colleagues. The consensus was to have a meeting with the parent, with my supervisor present. Unfortunately, this did not go well because the mother brought the child to the meeting. Even though everything was documented, she again called me a liar, claiming that "we teachers all stick together," and that she didn't believe any of it. I knew after this meeting that I needed to find and take a completely different approach.

I spoke to a colleague who knew both the child and my style of teaching quite well. She asked me, "Chantal, what do you think is setting him off around you? What do you think he needs?" These questions made me think and evaluate the way I behaved around him. I realized that when I was preparing

to go to work, I was getting ready for another “battle” with a six-year-old. This attitude was preventing me from building a relationship with him the way I had with other children. I thought about my colleague’s question about what I thought he needed from me, and narrowed my answer down to two things: affection and consistency. I had found a new approach.

Slowly, I began showing affection to him as soon as I picked him up from school. I immediately saw that this made a huge difference in his behaviour. I then tried sharing various parts of my life with him — pictures of the special people in my life and stories about my childhood. I told him that I was going to be his teacher for a long time. Because I felt he was asking me for consistency in the program, I began a “new” schedule which included the children’s input. This proved to be a huge success with this child and with the group as a whole.

I started at this centre nine months ago [at the time of writing]. Not one day goes by that this child does not mention how happy he is that I have kept my promise to stay. Our relationship has gone from physical aggression to physical affection. A daily hug and a smile are part of our daily routine. When I look back on this situation, I realize that my own behaviour at the outset hindered our relationship. It was I who needed to change to make this child’s experience more bearable, and maybe even enjoyable. I am very proud that I did not give up on him like so many other people had. This makes all the difference when I see the rewards this child has to offer.

Chantal Larabie is an early childhood educator at Cabbagetown Crèche in Toronto.

There are a number of aspects about Chantal’s work with this family that provoked strong feelings for her. The child openly rejected her; he subjected her to destructive and aggressively physical behaviour; the child’s parents blamed Chantal and were unsympathetic to her situation; and Chantal herself was in a new setting where she might have felt some isolation and lack of support as the only full-time staff in an off-site program. It’s not surprising that she described feeling discouraged.

However, Chantal related a number of things that reveal the kind of self-talk that assisted her to help this child. First of all, she recognized aspects of the situation (the recent turnover in staff) that helped her to understand the child’s behaviour. This prevented her from personalizing the difficulty and blaming herself for the problem. At the same time however, she was able to take responsibility for her own contribution to the problem — that she began to “prepare for battle” as she came to work. This approach helped Chantal to avoid understanding the problem as an overall reflection of an inability to be helpful (e.g. “I’m no good at this job”), and yet still see herself as involved in the problem, and so capable of making a difference.

By engaging in this kind of self-talk, Chantal maintained a sense of hope. She sought input from her colleagues in an effort to be more helpful to the child and family in the future. However, her hopefulness and persistence with this child did something more than lead Chantal to see her own behaviour in a new light. It also modelled something very important to the child she was trying to help. This child witnessed Chantal coping with the feelings of discouragement and frustration that he had worked so hard to instill in her. These are feelings the boy himself had experienced in the face of repeated loss from the frequent staff turnover. As Chantal tolerated, worked through and transformed the difficult feelings this child evoked in her, she provided a model for the child to tolerate and work through his own feelings of discouragement and anger.

Working with children creates many opportunities to feel frustrated or discouraged. But as Chantal’s story reminds us that our ability to understand, to work through and alter these feelings provides the children in our care with powerful models of positive self-talk and perseverance in coping with the challenges of life. © CCCF 2000



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