

# Young children understand the benefits of positive thinking

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Even kindergarteners know that thinking positively will make you feel better. And parents' own feelings of optimism may play a role in whether their children understand how thoughts influence emotions.

Those are the findings of a new study by researchers at Jacksonville University and the University of California, Davis. The study appears in the journal *Child Development*.

In the study, researchers looked at 90 mostly White [children](#) ages 5 to 10. The children listened to six illustrated stories in which two characters feel the same emotion after experiencing something positive (getting a new puppy), negative (spilling milk), or ambiguous (meeting a new teacher). Following each experience, one character has a separate optimistic thought, framing the event in a positive light, and the other has a separate pessimistic thought, putting the event in a negative light. Researchers described the subsequent thoughts verbally, then asked the children to judge each character's emotions and provide an explanation for those emotions. They were most interested in the degree to which children predicted different emotions for two characters in the same situation.

The researchers also had the children and their parents complete surveys to measure their individual levels of hope and optimism.

Children as young as 5 predicted that people would feel better after thinking [positive thoughts](#) than they would after thinking negative

thoughts. They showed the strongest insight about the influence of positive versus [negative thoughts](#) on emotions in ambiguous situations. And there was significant development in the children's understanding about the emotion-feeling link as they grew older.

The study also found that children had the most difficulty understanding how [positive thinking](#) could boost someone's spirits in situations that involved negative events—such as falling down and getting hurt. In these coping situations, children's levels of hope and optimism played a role in their ability to understand the power of positive thinking, but parents' views on the topic played an even larger part.

"The strongest predictor of children's knowledge about the benefits of positive thinking—besides age—was not the child's own level of hope and optimism, but their parents'," reports Christi Bamford, assistant professor of psychology at Jacksonville University, who led the study when she was at the University of California, Davis.

The findings point to parents' role in helping children learn how to use positive thinking to feel better when things get tough, Bamford notes. "In short, [parents](#) should consider modeling how to look on the bright side."

Provided by Society for Research in Child Development

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