

Positive reframing in parent-child relationships

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Leo Kanner, author of the first textbook on child psychiatry, used to tell

of two mothers he knew. One complained that her sons would spread the Sunday comics on the living room floor to read them. The other, whose sons had done the same thing as children, said it was one of her fondest memories. He used to argue that the second mother was the better parent, because she had a more positive attitude.

But what was behind that [positive attitude](#)? Perhaps the mother was thinking about how her [children](#) were honing their reading skills. Or how they were sharing both comics and floor space without a fight. In other words, she was most likely engaging in what we now call positive reframing—the practice of either focusing on the positive aspects of a bothersome situation or just looking at it differently. Positive reframing helps us see our children—and our children see themselves—in a more favorable light.

Applied to how we view children, the technique can prevent us from overreacting. When an adolescent does all those adolescent things, such as leaving her room a mess and spending too much time texting, we can take refuge in the knowledge that by challenging authority and connecting with friends, she is working through an important developmental stage.

Positive reframing can help us understand children from different cultures, too. For example, Native American students often resist participating in competitive learning games such as spelling bees, causing some teachers to see them as disengaged. However, when the students' resistance is understood as an expression of a cultural bias toward cooperation over competition, the teacher can see strength in it.

Applied to helping kids interpret their own behavior, positive reframing can foster growth. It can help overcome aversions, as it did for one young boy who hated bath time. Knowing he enjoyed war play, his mother got him to see the bath as a place to enact sea battles, bringing in

toy ships and using bubble bath to simulate foamy waves. The mother of a reluctant eater presented broccoli as "dino trees"—which her "brontosaurus" son would then devour. A couple with a daughter who resisted going to sleep because her room was dark and scary held a dance party in the dark, after which she associated being in the dark with having a good time.

Positive reframing can shore up children's confidence as well. On the last play of an important game, the right fielder on a Little League team I coached dropped a line-drive fly ball, which allowed our opponents to score the winning run. When the boy came to me distraught, I shared what the pitcher had told me—that his last pitch was too easy to hit, resulting in a hard-to-catch line drive. I also reminded the boy that before the game, I had denied him time in the outfield to practice shagging fly balls. He went from thinking he had blown the game to understanding that several factors had contributed to our team's loss.

Finally, even some of the toughest behavior problems often respond to positive reframing. For instance, when a first-grader made a beeline for the colored pencils by walking on chairs and desktops, his teacher said, "That's a great idea to use colored pencils for your journal. And you got them all by yourself." She went on to suggest that in the future, he keep his feet on the floor, which he agreed to do.

Another teacher, faced with a student, James, who suddenly jumped up from a class meeting and started to dance, turned to his classmates and said matter-of-factly, "James likes to dance." James responded by sitting down and rejoining the meeting.

The developmental psychologist Jerome Bruner praises the unflappable Head Start teacher who, while reading "Little Red Riding Hood" to her young students, was stopped short at the famous "All the better to eat you!" line. One little boy leapt to his feet, furious, and began cursing the

wolf, swearing like a sailor. The teacher simply reflected to herself on how much meaning the boy was finding in the story and then asked him how he would have written it differently. The question got him thinking—and quieted him down.

We might try to emulate that teacher's self-possession and know-how the next time a kid's shenanigans drive us to salty language ourselves. As it turns out, looking on the bright side isn't just for Pollyannas. It's for anyone who wants to help children develop while preserving their own sanity.

Provided by Tufts University

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