



## Optimistic Parenting

A New Look at Helping Parents with Challenging Children

*By V. Mark Durand, Ph.D. reprinted with permission*

You're pushing a grocery cart through the aisles of your local supermarket and your son spots the candy bars. He points and says, "Candy"! Almost at once you get that feeling in the pit of your stomach. Going through your mind are flashes of shopping trips past. Last week your son started screaming for candy and you resisted. He yelled louder and people looked at you and you knew they were thinking what a bad parent you are. You felt embarrassed and ashamed. So this time, instead of saying no to taking the bag of candy off the shelf and opening it, and despite knowing that this is probably a mistake, you allow him to eat from the bag while you finish shopping. So goes a typical day in the life of a parent with a challenging child.

Parents are inundated with advice about how to deal with behavior problems such as tantrums, bedtime disruptions, refusing to eat healthy foods, or just not listening. My colleagues and I have worked with thousands of mothers and fathers who have these challenging children. What we find, however, is that most parents have pretty good instincts. For example, they know you shouldn't give a child candy when he misbehaves. However certain thoughts and feelings get in the way of their good judgment. Thinking that everything is out of your control, that others (for example, your mother in-law, friends at the park) think you are a bad parent, that you feel you are a bad parent, or that your child may not be capable of changing are very common among parents.

In a recent large study we found that many

of these parents used language that revealed pessimistic attitudes. For example, someone who is highly pessimistic might describe a child's trip to the supermarket this way – "Shopping with my child is a disaster." On the other hand, parents who are more optimistic might describe the same type of experience in this way – "My child is not yet ready for long shopping trips." The parents with pessimistic thoughts had a harder time helping their child. So we decided to help these pessimistic families



recognize their styles of describing situations and have them practice more adaptive optimistic styles. By presenting these alternative styles of describing difficult situations, we help them to understand how their ways of viewing challenging circumstances can adversely affect their parenting. We then have them practice more adaptive optimistic styles.

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Our results? First, we were able to help mothers and fathers who had these pessimistic thoughts to be more optimistic. And, importantly, parents who became more optimistic were better able to follow through on the good parenting skills we taught them and their children became much better behaved. Finally, they felt better about themselves and their child's future. They were happier!

## Ten Tips to Optimistic Parenting

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**1. Explore your thoughts and feelings before, during and after meltdowns.**

Practice noticing these experiences so you can see later if they help or hurt your parenting skills.

**2. If your spouse or partner doesn't help – ask why.**

Just as your thoughts and feelings interfere with good parenting, so might your spouses' self doubts or doubts about your child. This involves the seemingly obvious but often very difficult issue that confronts most couples – “communication.”

**3. Believe you are a good parent.**

When you add up all you do for your child, the positives far outweigh any occasional lapses you may experience. Focus on the positive.

**4. Believe your child can change.**

All of our experience tells us any child can improve his or her challenging behavior. It helps to believe this and expect more from your child.

**5. Take care of yourself.**

You can't help your child if you are hurting. Give yourself permission to occasionally be “selfish.”

**6. Leverage – don't multi-task.**

Doing two things at once means you may be doing two things poorly. If you're stretched, try to combine activities with your child that achieve multiple goals (for example, having your child help set the table, which gets the chore done but also provides a learning experience).

**7. Parent in the moment.**

Keeping reminding yourself to focus on what is happening right now with your child (for example, having a good bath) rather than other things (for example, thinking about what to make for dinner while bathing your child).

**8. List three good things that happen each day.**

We sometimes have a tendency to focus too much on negative events (for example, a bad tantrum in the car) rather than on the positive ones (for example, playing nicely with siblings). Each night practice reminding yourself of the good things that happened that day.

**9. Express gratitude toward those who help you.**

One of the most powerful exercises in becoming a happier person is expressing gratitude. Thanking those who help you with your child (including your spouse or partner, if appropriate) will make you feel better and will make the other person feel better as well.

**10. Sometimes bad is OK.**

Feeling bad sometimes is inevitable for everyone. Accept the fact that there will be “down times” and don't fight them. As they say, “What doesn't kill you will only make you stronger.”

*The techniques used in this study are outlined in the book **Optimistic Parenting: Help and Hope for You and Your Challenging Child** by V. Mark Durand, Ph.D.*



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