



by Karen Stephens

Positive Thinking Bolsters Parenting Skills

Athletes aren't the only ones who achieve goals with the help of positive thinking. Positive thinking promotes skilled parenting, too.

All day long, each of us has an internal dialogue going on. Sometimes our self-talk is even spoken out loud. When I do something stupid, the phrase "Way to go, Stephens," sometimes pops out. And not in a cheerful tone.

It's a habit I've tried to curb because it just isn't useful. Rather than encourage me, it reinforces my sense of failure. And it models impatience to children who overhear my reprimand.

So I try to use more positive messages like: "Go slower and you'll get it," "Lighten up, this is fixable," or "It's no big deal, just try again." Still, bad-mouthing myself is a hard habit to break. Parents know that more than most. After all, every parent experiences some feelings of inadequacy, no matter how good their parenting track record is.

Giving in to the inevitable frustrations of parenting by engaging in negative self-talk is counter-productive and self-defeating. But for some odd reason, it seems a negative attitude is easier to slip into than a positive one. Positive thinking requires greater commitment, a strong will to practice it. But it has big pay-offs for everyone in the family.

Positive self-talk can help you focus on your long-term parenting goals. For instance, the phrase "Say what you mean and mean what you say," is something I like a lot. It's perfect as a short personal pep-talk. It targets your attention on what does work with kids.

Talking to oneself might sound silly, but I do recommend it as a coping tool for parents. The mind can hold one thought at a time; if you focus on the positive there's less room for the negative.

Even during confrontation with an irrational child, a quick mental pep-talk can help you parent better. It can help you choose your battles wisely. Attempting to remain positive promotes stability in the midst of mayhem! And when raising kids, mayhem happens.

Of course, I'm not naive. Positive thinking *alone* won't lead to good parenting or well-behaved children. It merely sets the stage for interactions. A positive attitude has to be backed up with decisive and constructive action, such as setting clear expectations and limits and enforcing them.

What a positive attitude can do is give parents the fortitude needed to consistently apply good parenting techniques. Some parents give in to negative thinking. They nag outrageous ultimatums at kids rather than actually enforce a reasonable consequence. With children as sparring partners, they participate in round after round of endless power struggles, never taking decisive steps to stop the fight. They completely give in to doom and gloom, casting a haunting shadow on family life.

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Negative attitudes that escalate into endless power struggles can't masquerade as good parenting. Parents who wallow in negativity end up with ill-behaved and resentful kids. But even worse, they pass their negative outlook onto their children.

Remember, parents are kids' first and most influential models. It is our pathway they follow. When children inherit a positive approach to life, they are much better prepared to live a good life of their own. And they are much more likely to practice responsible, positive parenting with their own children.

When you have trouble staying positive, it can be helpful to face up to your negative approach. Once patterns are rooted out and identified, purposefully replace pessimism with more positive thoughts.

Following are some reasons parents have shared with me to rationalize their negative or ineffective parenting. These are the reasons they give for not setting limits for kids and not enforcing them firmly, but compassionately.

- Let's see, young parents say they are lenient because they are inexperienced and don't know what to do. Single parents and families with two employed parents tell me they're too tired after work to "do battle." And parents home with kids say they refuse to always be the heavy when the "guilty" (their words, not mine) employed parent comes home and is indulgent and undermining.
- Some parents tell me they are short-tempered because they are stressed at the job. Others resent their parenting partner who doesn't carry a fair share of the child-rearing load. And there are some who had a horrible family life during childhood, so they never learned good parenting by example.

All those excuses testify that parenting is complex, hard work. And they all sprout from a grain of truth. But that doesn't change a thing. Kids need clear, consistent parenting conducted by a parent who is optimistic, hopeful, and positive. Giving in to negativity does no one any good. It just emotionally abandons children.

Negativity often leads to "knee-jerk" decisions that are unwise concessions to children. The challenge for every parent is keeping self-talks *constructive*. Bolster your backbone with positive thoughts so you can stay focused in the present to make wise parenting choices.

Positive thinking can take lots of forms. Calming phrases, such as "This, too, shall pass," can help you keep from crossing over the line during discipline. To combat a defeatist attitude, remind yourself that each day can be a fresh start. "Take it one step at a time" is a bit of positive thinking to remind you that progress may be gradual, but it is still progress.

You'll think of more phrases to bolster your parenting outlook. If you have trouble remembering them, leave Post-It® notes around the house or in the car for quick reference. They can help steer you back to a more positive path when parenting gets especially tough.

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.

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