

# Cheerful to a Fault

## “Positive” Practices with Negative Implications

By Alfie Kohn

We live in a smiley-face, keep-your-chin-up, look-on-the-bright-side culture. At the risk of being labeled a professional party pooper, I'd like to suggest that accentuating the positive isn't always a wise course of action where children are concerned. I say that not because I've joined the conservative chorus whose refrain is that kids today have it too damn easy and ought to be made to experience more failure (and show more “grit”).[1] Rather, my point is that some things that sound positive and upbeat turn out not to be particularly constructive.

1. Praise. The most salient feature of a positive judgment is not that it's positive but that it's a judgment. And in the long run, people rarely thrive as a result of being judged. Praise is the mirror image of criticism, not its opposite. Both are ways of doing things to kids as opposed to working with them. Verbal rewards are often more about manipulating than encouraging — a form of sugar-coated control. The main practical effect of offering a reward, whether it's tangible, symbolic, or verbal, is to provide a source of extrinsic motivation (for example, trying to please the rewarder), and this, according to a considerable body of research, tends to undermine intrinsic motivation (a commitment to the activity or value itself).

While “Good job!” may seem like a supportive thing to say, that support is actually made conditional on the child's doing what we ask or impressing us. What kids most need from adults, apart from nonjudgmental feedback and guidance, is unconditional support: the antithesis of a patronizing pat on the head for having jumped through our hoops. The solution, therefore, isn't as simple as praising children's effort instead of their ability, because the problem isn't a function of what's being praised — or, for that matter, how often praise is offered — but of praise itself.[2]

2. Automatic reassurance. Deborah Meier once remarked that if a child says one of her classmates doesn't like her,

we need to resist reassuring her that it's not true and getting the classmate to confirm it; then we must ask ourselves what has led to this idea. Probably there is truth to the cry for help, and our refusal to admit it may simply lead the child to hide her hurt more deeply. Do we do too much reassuring - ‘It doesn't hurt,’ ‘It'll be okay’ - and not enough exploring, joining with the child's queries, fears, thoughts?[3]

A reflexive tendency to say soothing things to children in distress may simply communicate that we're not really listening to them. Perhaps we're offering reassurance more because that's what we need to say than because it's what they need to hear.

3. Happiness as the primary goal. How can we help children grow up to be happy? That's an important question, but here's another one: How can we help children grow up to be concerned about whether other people are happy? We don't want our kids to end up as perpetually miserable

social activists, but neither should we root for them to become so focused on their own well-being that they're indifferent to other people's suffering. Happiness isn't a good thing if it's purchased at the price of being unreflective, complacent, or self-absorbed.

Moreover, as the psychologist Ed Deci reminds us, anger and sadness are sometimes appropriate responses to things that happen to us (and around us). "When people want only happiness, they can actually undermine their own development," he said, "because the quest for happiness can lead them to suppress other aspects of their experience. . . . The true meaning of being alive is not just to feel happy, but to experience the full range of human emotions." [4]

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And here are four specific cheerful-sounding utterances or slogans that I believe also merit our skepticism:

4. "High(er) expectations." This phrase, typically heard in discussions about educating low-income or minority students, issues from policy makers with all the thoughtfulness of a sneeze. It derives most of its appeal from a simplistic contrast with low expectations, which obviously no one prefers. But we need to ask some basic questions: Are expectations being raised to the point that students are more demoralized than empowered? Are these expectations being imposed on students rather than developed with them? And most fundamentally: High expectations to do what, exactly? Produce impressive scores on unimpressive tests?

The school reform movement driven by slogans such as "tougher standards," "accountability," and "raising the bar" arguably lowers meaningful expectations insofar as it relies on dubious indicators of progress — thereby perpetuating a "bunch o' facts" model of learning. Expecting poor children to fill in worksheets more accurately just causes them to fall farther behind affluent kids who are offered a more thoughtful curriculum. Indeed, as one study found, such traditional instruction may be associated with lower expectations on the part of their teachers. [5]

5. "Ooh, you're so close!" (in response to a student's incorrect answer). My objection here is not, as traditionalists might complain, that we're failing to demand absolute accuracy. Quite the contrary. The problem is that we're more focused on getting students to produce right answers than on their understanding of what they're doing. Even in math, one student's right answer may not signify the same thing as another's. The same is true of two wrong answers. A student's response may have been only one digit off from the correct one, but she may have gotten there by luck (in which case she wasn't really "close" in a way that matters). Conversely, a student who's off by an order of magnitude may grasp the underlying principle but have made a simple calculation error.

6. "If you work hard, I'm sure you'll get a better grade next time." Again, we may have intended to be encouraging, but the actual message is that what matters in this classroom isn't learning but performance. It's not about what kids are doing but how well they're doing it. Decades' worth of research has shown that these two emphases tend to pull in opposite directions. Thus, the relevant distinction isn't between a good grade and a bad grade; it's leading kids to focus on grades versus inviting them to engage with ideas.

Similarly, if we become preoccupied with effort as opposed to ability as the primary determinant of high marks, we miss the crucial fact that marks are inherently destructive. Like demands to "raise expectations," [a growth mindset isn't a magic wand](#). In fact, it can distract us from the harmfulness of certain goals — and of certain ways of teaching and assessing — by suggesting that more effort, like more rigor, is all that's really needed. Not only is it not sufficient; when the outcome is misconceived, it isn't even always desirable. [6]

7. “Only Positive Attitudes Allowed Beyond This Point.” I’ve come across this poster slogan in a number of schools, and each time I see it, my heart sinks. Its effect isn’t to create a positive atmosphere but to serve notice that the expression of negative feelings is prohibited: “Have a nice day . . . or else.” It’s a sentiment that’s informative mostly for what it tells us about the needs of the person who put up the poster. It might as well say “My Mental Health Is So Precarious That I Need All of You to Pretend You’re Happy.”

Kids don’t require a classroom that’s relentlessly upbeat; they require a place where it’s safe to express whatever they’re feeling, even if at the moment that happens to be sadness or fear or anger. Bad feelings don’t vanish in an environment of mandatory cheer — they just get swept under the rug where people end up tripping over them, so to speak. Furthermore, students’ “negativity” may be an entirely apt response to an unfair rule, an authoritarian environment, or a series of tasks that seem pointless. To focus on students’ emotions in order to manufacture a positive climate (or in the name of promoting “self-regulation” skills) is to pretend that the problem lies exclusively with their responses rather than with what we may have done that elicited them.[7]

## NOTES

1. In fact, I challenge that position at some length in a new book called [The Myth of the Spoiled Child](#) (Boston: Da Capo Press, 2014).
2. For more on the problems with praise — and the research that supports this critique — see my books [Unconditional Parenting](#) (New York: Atria, 2005) and [Punished by Rewards](#) (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993).
3. Deborah Meier, “For Safety’s Sake,” *Educational Horizons* 83 (2004): 59.
4. Edward L. Deci, *Why We Do What We Do* (New York: Grosset, 1995), p. 192.
5. Teachers in traditional classrooms of low-income kindergarteners “were more likely to expect less of students from families with discrepant values. . . [whereas] children in student-centered classrooms were less likely to be disadvantaged by low expectations based on teachers’ perceptions of parents’ value differences.” See Penny Hauser-Cram, Selcuk R. Sirin, and Deborah Stipek, “When Teachers’ and Parents’ Values Differ: Teachers’ Ratings of Academic Competence in Children from Low-Income Families,” *Journal of Educational Psychology* 95 (2003): 813-20.
6. For more on the distinction between a learning orientation and a performance (or achievement) orientation, see the research cited in my book, [The Schools Our Children Deserve](#) (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), chapter 2. I discuss grades in particular in [“The Case Against Grades,”](#) *Educational Leadership*, November 2011: 28-33.
7. Item number 7 is adapted from an article called [“Bad Signs,”](#) *Kappa Delta Pi Record*, Fall 2010: 4-9, which also takes a dim view of “No Whining” signs and inspirational posters.

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