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Cambria Siddoway
cambsid@student.byu.edu

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The Importance of Teaching Kids How to be Hopeful

By Cambria Siddoway
Brigham Young University

Kids hope for a lot of things. Some kids may hope that Santa will bring them a puppy for Christmas or that they can become great at what they love – when I was a child I hoped to be an accomplished ballerina. Still other kids hope that their brother will stop fighting in school or that their mom will get a better job to help pay the bills. Regardless of the object of hope, the ability to possess hope has significant benefits for children. For example, children who feel hopeful set high goals for themselves, are more optimistic, and have higher self-esteem.

Despite these benefits, levels of hopefulness decline with age. Where did all that hope for the future go? Why are youth naturally more hopeful? Can anything be done to keep hope from fading with age? These important research questions are central to the work of Dr. Ashley Fraser in Brigham Young University's School of Family Life.

Measuring Hope

Dr. Fraser's work builds on the theory of hope developed by Rick Snyder (Fraser et al., 2022) which highlights three central characteristics through which hope is experienced. For an individual to truly hope for something, they must be able to first, set a goal. Second, they need to engage in a process known as pathways thinking, which means making a plan to accomplish the goal. Third, the individual must believe that they can make the choices and develop the abilities necessary to follow that plan, a practice known as agency thinking.

In light of this process, Dr. Fraser's research aims to identify how the unique experience of each individual affects their ability to develop hope.. She examines how the quality of relationships with family and friends relate to the characteristics described by hope theory. Importantly, her research highlights how people's differences in race, gender, socioeconomic status, and religion, either promote or hinder the abilities central to children's ability to hope.

Though many studies have examined how feelings of hope change over time (Fraser et al., 2021; Fraser et al., 2022), Dr. Fraser's research goes beyond documenting levels of hopefulness to examining what influences the experience of hope. In order to measure the nebulous construct of hope, she observes children's behaviors associated with goal-setting, pathway thinking, and agency thinking during a structured play task.

In this play task, Dr. Fraser's research team assigns children to complete an easy task where the goal is for each child to drive a toy car through a simple maze to reach a sticker. After the children complete this task, they are asked to do the same thing but this time the pathway to the sticker is blocked. The speech and behaviors the children use to complete this task even with the obstacle allows Fraser and her team to observe elements of pathway thinking. The final task assigned is an impossible one. All of the paths to the sticker are blocked. Researchers monitor the kids' self-talk and reaction to facing an impossible task in order to measure aspects of their agency thinking. These observations, allow Dr. Fraser's team to examine characteristics of hopeful thinking in children and also analyze the type of things that influence its development and expression over time.

The Importance of Hope

When kids feel hopeful, they have better outcomes. In school, kids who feel more hopeful score better on tests and reach a higher GPA (Fraser et al., 2021; Fraser et al., 2022). Emotionally, kids who feel more hopeful have higher self-esteem, believe in themselves more, and feel a stronger sense of purpose and meaning in life (Bryce et al., 2020; Fraser et al., 2022). Hope can offset poor mental health such as depression and anxiety (Fraser et al., 2021; Fraser et al., 2022). Further, hope is not a fixed or innate ability. Research shows that hope can be taught and learned (Bryce et al., 2020; Fraser et al., 2022) and that positive experiences in children's families and schools can help them feel more hopeful about their abilities and their futures.

How to Encourage Hopefulness in Children

Based on the research surrounding hope, Dr. Fraser suggests three ways to promote higher levels of hopefulness across childhood.

- First, regularly and intentionally discuss the future with children. Guide and assist children in setting goals that are realistic and attainable.

- Help children make smaller “stepping stone” goals that will help them to achieve their larger goal. When challenges arise, work with children to overcome those obstacles in order to keep moving towards their main goal.
- Provide warmth, love, and support. By developing a relationship that is founded on encouragement, children are better equipped to believe in themselves. Praise children when smaller goals are reached and encourage children to not give up when obstacles occur.

Discussing the future, working on small goals, and being supportive can help children nurture hope. This hope is a powerful tool for building a brighter future.

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