

HOW PARENTS AND TEACHERS CAN BE OPTIMISTIC LEADERS FOR CHILDREN

By: Maria Rosado, Head Teacher 1W, and Judy Jablon, Founder and Executive Director, Leading for Children

We know that young children thrive in an environment of trusting relationships with their families, and with the adults who care for and educate them. All aspects of children's development—intellectual, social, emotional, physical, behavioral, and moral—are shaped by the relationships they have with the adults in their lives.¹ Now, envision this environment of nurturing relationships, and then add to your vision the concept that all the adults in children's lives possess a clear sense of purpose, have strong voices, and listen and learn openly from diverse perspectives. These adults are intentional decision-makers who collaborate with others to make good things happen. They are optimistic, see a path forward, and have the grit to persevere even when the going gets tough—like during the current pandemic. Can you imagine the possibilities for all children if they could live and learn in an environment with such exemplary models of optimistic leadership surrounding them?

Optimism is an attitude—a state of mind—that allows us to see a path forward. Optimists move beyond disappointments and persist to find solutions. Optimism is being able to see the light at the end of the tunnel. All children deserve the adults in their lives to be models of optimistic leadership.

Optimistic Leaders are committed. A commitment is a pledge, a promise, and a responsibility. To be an Optimistic Leader for children, we invite you to practice five commitments so that you can show up more effectively as a powerful model for children:

1. Think impact to make informed decisions. We are models for children when we pause to think about the implications of what might happen before we act or speak. For example:

- Sonia wakes Maxie up a little bit earlier each morning so that he has enough time to get ready without

having to rush. Sonia practices *think impact* because she knows that when Maxie has to rush, he has a much harder time adjusting to transitions throughout the day.

- Maria practices *think impact* as she plans for read-aloud before lunch on a rainy day. She creates a special experience to go along with the book, *Going on a Bear Hunt*, by creating an obstacle course and using flashlights to engage the children. By finding time in her busy day to take a moment and think about what impact she wants to have on the children during story time, Maria comes up with an idea that delights the children, furthers their experience of the story, and helps her remember how good she is at her job.

2. Cultivate self-awareness to guide thought, emotion, and behavior. We are models for children when we actively work to understand our moods, emotions, strengths, and challenges so that we can show up effectively at home and at work. For example:

- Rakia is exhausted after her last Zoom call of the day, and now she has to make dinner for the family. She practices *cultivate self-awareness* by taking a few minutes for self-care. Just a few minutes to wash her face and take a deep breath helps her to show up for

"Optimism is essential to achievement and it is also the foundation for courage and true progress."

~ Nicholas M. Butler



her family in a way that leads to a pleasant evening for everyone.

- Luiza realizes that the long delay on the subway means being late for work. As the tension in her body increases, she practices *cultivate self-awareness* by doing some self-talk. First, she acknowledges that the situation is out of her control. She knows that when things get out of control, it can upset her whole day. She sends a quick text to her team letting them know that she'll be late. She puts in her headphones and listens to some calming music for the remainder of the trip. When she arrives at school, she relaxes her face and gets herself together, so that she can walk into the classroom calm and collected.

3. Nurture relationships to support learning and collaboration. We are models for children when we are open and honest in relationships, and take the time to strengthen connections even when that is somewhat challenging. For example:

- Robert and Marcus are at it again. They are building with blocks, and all is well until they begin yet another squabble. Martha, the boys' mom, waits a few minutes to see if it resolves but, instead, the tension is escalating. Rather than trying to get them to stop arguing by telling them to do so, Martha practices *nurture relationships* by joining in the play. She distracts them from the disagreement by initiating a new problem for them to solve. In this way the boys get to continue their play, and also enjoy each other's company.
- At the water table, Ashley and Kianna suddenly begin to grab at the same toy. Karen practices *nurture relationships* by providing the girls with the language they need to communicate their feelings to one another.

Karen says, "Ashley, you can tell Kianna that you are using the blue cup right now. She can have a turn in a few minutes. Kianna, you can choose a different cup, and then have a turn with the blue cup when Ashley is finished."

4. Refine communication for mutual clarity and understanding. We are models for children when we engage in authentic back-and-forth conversations verbally and in writing. We demonstrate for them how communication strengthens relationships and encourages deeper thinking and learning. For example:

- Josie comes into the classroom and announces to her teacher, "I'm not a handful. My sister is." In a light-hearted conversation between Josie's teacher and her Dad, Roger, they agree that Roger will practice *refine communication* by being more careful about the language he uses at home when talking with his partner about the children.
- The teaching team in 3E practices *refine communication* by intentionally using the person's name when they speak with individuals. Whether talking with each other, colleagues who step into the room, children, or families, the team always begins the conversation with the person's name so that they are modeling intentional language for children.

5. Activate curiosity to find connections and continue learning. We are models for children when we ask questions, consider possibilities, seek opinions from others, and develop new solutions. For example:

- Laila reads to her children every evening, and Henry and Sophie look forward to the routine. From time to time, Laila practices *activate curiosity* by inviting the children to predict what might happen next or come up with their own ending to the story. They re-read favorite stories over and over again, with curiosity grabbing their attention and keeping them interested.
- Maria practices *activate curiosity* by using the word "curious" with children each day. As Cairo peers over Ryan's shoulder to see what he's doing, Maria says, "Cairo, you can say, 'Ryan, I'm curious. What are you making?'" In this way Maria models the power of curiosity as a way to learn, and uses language to promote interactions among children.

We believe that the more we model Optimistic Leadership for children, the more successful they will be now and in the future. We invite you to be a model of the change you want to see.

Resources

¹Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University (2016). From Best Practices to Breakthrough Impacts: A Science-Based Approach to Building a More Promising Future for Young Children and Families. Retrieved from www.developingchild.harvard.edu.