

Cultivating positive conversations: The Accept-Reframe-Explain technique

It's hard to convince children of this empowering mindset shift when they have to go to school every day and work in a system which defines success very narrowly. They see their peers awarded, succeed and yet they might get the effort certificate, if they are lucky. We have to rebalance the narrative and influence children's self-talk to be more positive - and the earlier the better. This chapter focuses on providing some practical tips that have helped me with my children:

Create space to talk and really listen to them.

Children can hold in so many of their worries at school, struggling in silence. They need somewhere to let those feelings go and to give us parents the opportunity to reframe those feelings. All too often, children develop feelings of inadequacy and shame around their struggles at school, which can become terribly damaging if left unchecked. Give them accepting space to talk but don't force it. Ask open questions about their day and let conversations emerge naturally, ideally while doing something together like cooking or driving somewhere, so the conversations doesn't feel too intense.

Validate their feelings but reframe them: Accept - Explain - Reframe

It's so tempting to 'correct' children when they say they're stupid or dumb - words I heard over and over again from my middle child. We can reframe what they say about themselves later but initially, we have to say we understand why they feel that way so that they feel heard and understood - a simple "ok..." will do. The feelings of inadequacy and shame are very real to them so we can't dismiss it. Try the Accept-Explain-Reframe model like this:

Ok, I get you're feeling that way. I know how hard it is for you. Our brains are all different and your brain finds [writing/numbers/control/focus/attention] particularly difficult. But your brain is wonderfully creative and that has the potential to take you so far in life; it just needs more help in harnessing its power, especially while you're still growing.

You can also use role models in your child's life to help explain and reframe: inspire them and make them feel less alone. My second child was over the moon when he heard his uncle had been diagnosed with ADHD. Try something like this:

I can see how frustrating it is for you. [Dad/uncle/aunt] really struggled with [dyslexia/focus/a busy brain] when he/she was your age but you will get there. Your types of brain find [focus/concentration/organisation] particularly difficult, but your brain also sees incredible connections that others can't see and that has the potential to take you far in life.

Focus on the positive (while being careful with praise)

While allowing space for your child to express their feelings, don't dwell on this or go looking for it. When you ask about their day, keep it light and open; even ask about their "best bits" so that you know about aspects of school life they do enjoy and use this as part of your reframing.

Observe their strengths while being careful in the way you might praise them. There is lots of research out there about being careful and sparing in the use of praise - praise tends to be associated with approval and admiration, involving saying "well done!" or "you're so clever". Subconsciously, this can make children feel that your approval or admiration is attached to what they do rather than who they are. Children can become dependent on that praise and admiration which damages resilience in the longer term (see Chapter 2 for more on resilience).

Instead, making positive observations is subtly different; it tempers the element of approval so that the child doesn't sense that your love is somehow attached to the compliment. For example, I might observe how creative and imaginative my eldest son is in his lego creations and how I wished I was more creative; I might observe how full of life, power and energy my second son is and that one day he'll set the world alight with his incredible energy - he'll be unstoppable, whatever he decides to do. Find positives in their traits and present these as strengths. These observations will give them something to hold on to in moments of struggle - they will know there is more to them than test scores.

The power of parents' talk in turning a child's thinking around is crucial and the sooner these conversations start, the better. Hearing them, understanding them, seeing and complimenting who *they* really are gives them the confidence and resilience not to be defined by what the education system considers to be successful, but to create their own definition of success.