

insights



When young people catastrophise

by Michael Grose

Recently, Deidre (not her real name), a mother of two children, told me how her 13-year-old son would often exaggerate his woes with comments such as “This is the worst day ever” when he came in the door after school. She was seeking my advice on what approach she should take with her son.

Diedre was attuned to her son’s needs. She realised that he had a need to talk about what was on his mind, which put her at odds with her husband who viewed her son as a pessimist. So what approach to take?

Place time limits on pessimism

Her son was more than likely down the pessimist end of the pessimism-optimism continuum. There’s nothing wrong with that although it would very limiting if he saw the world only through a negative lens. Pessimism and optimism are part genetic and part learned so regardless of how sunny and optimistic the adults around them are, some kids are just more prone to seeing the downside in most situations. It’s important to listen to kids but at the same time don’t allow them to wallow in self-pity or go over old, negative ground. Listen to their tale but at some point it’s best to say, “Enough! It’s time to think about other things.”

Cue kids to talk

Children of all ages have a need to talk about their days and get things off their chests. [Kids Helpline’s](#) busiest part of the day is the time immediately after school when kids call to talk about problems with teachers and also with peers. It’s healthy for young people to talk to adults to debrief. “The worst day ever” is a type of cue for Deidre’s son to vent. Perhaps Diedre can let her son know that she’s always available to talk and that all he needs to do is say, “Mum, I need to



talk”, letting him know that he doesn’t have to be negative in order for her to listen.

Allow kids to vent and be understood

There’s nothing more therapeutic than knowing someone understands you. As a listener that means you need to stop what you are doing and really tune into the feelings behind your child’s venting. If your child is feeling sad, mad or rejected think of a recent time when you felt the same way and share that with them. It will allow you to get on the same wavelength as your child. This takes time and a willingness to be vulnerable, but it is probably what your child wants from you.

Call kids out on extreme black-and-white language

Many young people catastrophise or see situations in extreme terms. “The worst day ever”, “Everyone hates me” and “The teacher never says anything nice to me” are examples of extreme views. The world is rarely so black and white. Challenge extreme language. Wind it back with more realistic responses such as “Yes, it sounds like you’re having a bad day”, “Some people can be unpleasant but you have some terrific friends” or “That teacher can be grumpy sometimes but I think you’ll find he can be reasonable too”



Encourage kids to show gratitude

If you have a child who constantly brings the negative parts of their day to you then it may be wise to bring some balance to his or her viewpoint. Do this by encouraging them to show some gratitude for the good or positive things that happened to them. Many resilience experts encourage children and young people to keep a gratitude journal. At the end of each day they should note in this journal three things that happened to them that they are grateful for. Not only does this add some much-needed perspective but routinely looking for the good and positive sides of life can become habit-forming even for died-in-the-wool negative Nevilles and Nellies.

Deidre's initial approach – listening to her son when he wanted to talk about his day – was the right one. However she admitted she was tired of being the sole recipient of her son's constant negativity. If you can identify with Deidre then I encourage you to be empathetic and understanding but also to have some different strategies at your finger tips to steer your child or young person towards a more positive, more realistic appraisal, not allowing one bad event or incident define their entire day.



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Michael Grose, founder of Parenting Ideas, is one of Australia's leading parenting educators. He's the author of 10 books for parents including Thriving! and the best-selling Why First Borns Rule the World and Last Borns Want to Change It, and his latest release Spoonfed Generation: How to raise independent children.