



# OPTIMISTIC THINKING

## Even If...



### TEACHER/FACILITATOR NOTES

Current research by Dr. Richard Davidson and others can provide hope to adult caregivers of children. Rather than being an innate characteristic of a fortunate few, resilience (the ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change) is a set of teachable, learnable skills. This means that when the inevitable times of hardship, disappointment, and difficulty come along, we can support our youth to draw upon skills we've been intentionally helping them practice all along.

[The Devereux Center for Resilient Children](#) offers resources for identifying and strengthening our internal beliefs. These beliefs are the feelings and thoughts we have about ourselves and how effective we think we are at taking action in life.

The resource "Building Your Bounce" tells us that when internal core beliefs are positive, they can serve as a cozy energy blanket around you. You can shrug off hurtful comments, accept compliments, and use your positive feelings to cope with life's ups and downs. It is never too late to start building your resilience. Positive internal beliefs lay a foundation for:

- Setting goals and sticking to them
- Learning from mistakes
- Bouncing back from major life events and loss
- Accepting praise
- Trusting others
- Handling unexpected challenges
- Trusting instincts



**DURATION:** 40 minutes (flexible)

**GOALS:** [Teacher/Facilitator and Student/Participant](#)

### MATERIALS:

- ["Even if..."](#) written on chart paper or board, with room for multiple examples
- An "everybody" (picture) book with a central message of resilience in the face of everyday difficulties.  
Examples:
  - o Some Days, Other Days by P. J. Peterson
  - o Manuela's Gift by Kristyn Rehling Estes (Author), Claire Cotts (Illustrator)




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## MAIN POINTS: What is resilience? (3 minutes)

- Resilience is our ability to recover from or adjust to difficult situations.
- Our brains are able to learn new ways of handling difficult situations.
- First we feel, then we think. So, regular, intentional practice in noticing how we react to a trying situation and then reframing as needed is necessary for increasing our resilience.



## GUIDING LANGUAGE

*Resilience is the word that describes being able to recover from difficulties or adjust to changes in our lives, especially those that are hard for us. It's exciting that researchers have discovered that resilience isn't just something that either you're lucky you were born with, or unlucky that you weren't. We can all become more resilient than we are now.*

*One important way to build our skills is to pay close attention to how we are reacting to the things that happen to us each day. Everyone experiences little things every day that go wrong, or don't go the way we want them to. And there are also big, hard things that happen in people's lives. With practice, we can get better at noticing how we feel about those difficult events, and be in charge of how we react.*

*Turn to a neighbor and tell them what you're thinking right now about this idea. If you have a question, see what your partner thinks. We'll take two minutes for this, so be sure both of your voices are heard. Pause. If time permits, take input and questions from students/participants.*

*Keep this big idea about resilience in mind as you listen to this short story.*

*Read the book you've selected. (6 minutes. Examples below are from *Some Days, Other Days*.)*

## MAIN POINTS: Introducing "Even if..." language

- If we recognize our initial negative responses to a situation, and then reframe them, we gain more control over how we will react.
- Using specific language each time we're trying to reframe our response helps our brains become familiar with this process. Our brain can recognize that we've done the same thing before. This helps strengthen the new neural pathways that help this more positive reaction become our "default setting" or "first response."
- Have students/participants cite examples from the text as evidence of situations in which characters did or did not notice their initial negative response and shift their reactions.




# OPTIMISTIC THINKING



## GUIDING LANGUAGE (4 minutes)

*Let's think together about things that happened in the story that didn't go the way Jimmy wanted them to. Then we'll use "even if" language to practice being able to adjust and feel okay. Let's start with breakfast. Jimmy loves the days when he gets waffles for breakfast and doesn't like when he has to eat the cereal his Dad picked out, that Jimmy doesn't like the taste of.*

*If we start with the phrase, "even if," what could Jimmy tell himself about his breakfast? We may even think right off the bat of things Jimmy might do to make the same situation go better another time.*

Possible responses:

"Even if I didn't get waffles today, I get them some days. I'm going to tell my Mom how much I like to eat her waffles."

"Even if I don't like this cereal, I was really hungry, and now I'm not."

"Even if I didn't pick this cereal, sometimes I get to pick the cereal. I'm going to write the name of the cereal I like on the grocery list when the box is almost empty."

Repeat with other examples from the text.

*When we practice noticing the thoughts and feelings we are having when something doesn't go our way, or is stressful or challenging, it can help us gain control over how we react.*



## MAIN POINT: Guided practice with "even if..." language (5 minutes)

- Consider using a developmentally appropriate idea from your own [Optimistic Thinking Teacher/Facilitator Action Story Map](#) activity to launch this guided practice brainstorm.
- Have students/participants draw from their own real or imagined experiences to brainstorm a list of situations, recording them as "even if..." sentence stems.
- Once a list has been generated and recorded, brainstorm multiple variations of endings for one or two from the list. Number the generated examples for later use.



## GUIDING LANGUAGE

*Think about other examples, from real life or that you can imagine, when something happens (or doesn't happen) that might be disappointing or frustrating. Pause.*

*Let's brainstorm a list of situations that we can use later to practice our "even if" thinking.*




# OPTIMISTIC THINKING



**MAIN POINT:** Independent practice with “even if…” language (10 minutes)

In partners or groups of three, students/participants choose other examples from the group’s list and generate multiple variations of endings.



## GUIDING LANGUAGE

*Now that we’ve tried a few of these together, you’re going to have time in (partners or small groups) to be creative together, thinking about many different positive ways the “even if” could be completed.*

*Start by choosing one of the examples from the list. Think together to come up with at least two different ways the “even if” could be completed. Do that same thing for as many examples from the list as you can. We’ll have about eight minutes to work on this. Decide how you’ll record your ideas—whether you’ll take turns or ask one person to be the recorder. You could copy the whole “even if…” beginning, but it’s also okay to just write the number from the list. Ask for and answer any questions. Okay, get into your team and begin! Give students/participants eight minutes to work.*



**MAIN POINTS:** Group debrief (10 minutes)

- Bring students/participants back to whole group focus. Refer to one of the “even if…” stems from the chart and elicit a variety of responses from multiple small groups.
- Help students/participants recognize any patterns that demonstrate ownership and internal locus of control. Examples:
- “Even if I didn’t get invited to play today, next time I can ask someone to play with me.” As opposed to: “Even if I didn’t get invited to play today, next time maybe they will let me play.”
- “Even if I didn’t do well on the test today, next time I can study more and ask questions about what I don’t understand before the test.” Instead of: “Even if I didn’t do well on the test today, next time maybe the test will be easier.”



## GUIDING LANGUAGE

*Teams, you have one more minute. Please finish saying and writing just the one thought that you are on right now. Pause for one minute, then give your [Attention Signal](#).*

*Raise your hand with some ideas to get us started. Please tell us the number of the “even if” your team had ideas about. Elicit a variety of responses for the same sentence stem before repeating with other numbered items, as time permits. When student/participant examples are choices that are within the students’/ participants’ control, point this out, briefly and matter-of-factly, not as praise. Do this in a summary way, including multiple examples, to maximize reinforcing the ideas over the responder. “I notice that choosing another partner, practicing my facts out loud before the test, and taking three deep breaths are all suggestions that we have control over and could make the choice to do.”*



# OPTIMISTIC THINKING



**MAIN POINT:** Reflection (3 minutes)

Provide private thinking time for student/participant reflection.



## GUIDING LANGUAGE

*Now we're going to give each other some private thinking time. Pause for the group to settle into silence. Answer to yourself, silently: How often do I find myself feeling upset or resentful because something isn't going my way? Pause. How quickly do I usually stop feeling upset? Does it sometimes take hours or days to really stop thinking about what happened? Pause. How easy or difficult was it for me to think of several different ways to end our "even if" sentences today?*



**MAIN POINT:** Closure (1 minute)

Invite students/participants to pay special attention to their reactions to challenging situations, and to try practicing the "even if" reframing strategy.



## GUIDING LANGUAGE

*For the rest of today, let's all pay special attention to the thoughts and feelings we have when we are in challenging situations, big or small. Let's try to use "even if..." thinking to help move through the challenge without getting stuck in upset or resentful feelings.*

*And even if it's hard to do at first, the more we practice, the better we'll get at it!*



## EXTENSIONS

- Revisit this concept and the "even if" reframing strategy as a whole group at least once more this week, and then occasionally after that as appropriate.
- Overtly model using the "even if" reframing strategy in your own language.
- Use the "even if" reframing strategy in private conferencing with students/participants.



# OPTIMISTIC THINKING

## Teacher / Student Goals

*Optimistic Thinking: A child's attitude of confidence, hopefulness, and positive thinking regarding herself/himself and her/his life situations in the past, present, and future.*

**My students/participants are able to:**

- Speak about positive things
- Say good things about the future
- Express looking forward to activities or events

**I am aware of my individual students'/participants' abilities to verbalize alternative positive outcomes, even in trying situations.**

- The environment I create supports my students'/participants' growth related to developing their abilities to notice and name possible positive outcomes or alternatives in trying situations.

**Student/participant: Optimistic Thinking goals and demonstrated behaviors**

**Students/participants will:**

- Develop strategies for demonstrating Optimistic Thinking
- Be able to recognize alternatives and imagine positive outcomes in difficult situations (real and hypothetical)

**DESSA OPTIMISTIC THINKING INDICATORS**

(Highlighted indicators are directly addressed in this lesson.)

I can:

Carry myself with confidence
Say good things about myself
Speak about positive things
Look forward to classes or activities at school
Say good things about my classmates
Say good things about the future
Express high expectations for myself




# OPTIMISTIC THINKING

## Attention Signal



### MAIN POINTS

- A well-practiced and consistently implemented attention signal is essential in group learning situations. Whether adults or students, any gathering of engaged participants is going to be deeply immersed in meaningful, task-oriented conversations during which the you will need to get their attention.
- While there are many versions of attention signals (flashing the lights, clapping, raising or lowering your voice), one that has been most consistently effective is to raise your hand in the air and wait for everyone else in the room to raise their own hand and be silent before your proceed with directions or information.
- This signal works well because it engages participants in a multi-sensory experience. There will be kinesthetic engagement (raising their own hands) and visual (seeing others raise their hands) and auditory (hearing the noise level drop) cues. It also reinforces two Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) / DESSA constructs: Self-Management and Social Awareness.



### GUIDING LANGUAGE

*There will be many times when you are working together and talking to one another, and I'll need to be able to get your attention. When you see me raise my hand, you'll have two jobs. One is to raise your hand too. That gives others around you a visual cue that they should quietly look my way. The other is to stop talking! That will help the room quickly become silent, so you can hear the next direction or announcement.*

*As we get used to using this attention signal, you'll notice that you're building on two Social and Emotional Learning skills. One is Self-Management, as you regulate yourself to do those two jobs of raising your hand and becoming silent. The other SEL skill you'll be building is Social Awareness, as you cue in on what others around you are doing. If we help each other by following these two steps, we'll soon be able to get in and out of lively conversations seamlessly.*



### TEACHER/FACILITATOR TIPS

- Cultivate patience, realizing that it's a positive signal of deep engagement for participants to be so caught up in their academic dialogue that they are reluctant to stop, or don't immediately notice your silently raised hand.
- Hold an inner and outer attitude of goodwill as the group settles into complete silence before you begin talking. If you consistently wait for complete silence, the group learns your expectation and will become quiet more quickly over time. If you begin to talk while some participants are still talking, they will believe that it's okay for some people to continuing conversing, and are much less likely to meet your stated expectation for the Attention Signal. (It's not necessary that every hand goes up, but is necessary that all are quiet.)
- Refrain from restating your expectations or from singling out participants with requests that they become quiet. Let your silent raised hand be the only signal they have to attend to, and soon it will become the only signal they need!

# Even If...

**Resiliency:** The ability to recover from or adjust to misfortune or change.

**Internal beliefs:** The feelings and thoughts we have about ourselves and our lives, and how effective we think we are at taking actions.

**Internal locus of control:** The belief that events in my life, good and bad, are caused by things that I can influence or control with my attitude, behavior, and effort.

**Even if... ( )** \_\_\_\_\_

**Even if... ( )** \_\_\_\_\_

**Even if... ( )** \_\_\_\_\_

**Even if... ( )** \_\_\_\_\_

**Even if... ( )** \_\_\_\_\_



## Story Mapping: My Journey

Sharing a compelling personal story will connect you, head and heart, with your students. Reflect on powerful experiences in your life that could make a meaningful story. As you do so, keep this in mind:

*“STAR moment” (Something To Always Remember):*

*“What do you want the audience to feel? What do you want the audience to remember? What was the critical moment in the story? Make sure you know what message you want your audience to come away with, so that the story you’ve told is one your audience can retell, too.”*

– Nance Duarte

### Building your Story: Web, write, weave

Prepare your own story to share with your students:

1. Watch the Marcus Wilson Journey Story [video](#). As you watch, record ideas or words that are the most compelling for you. What are his “STAR moments”? If you were only going to be able to share one minute of ideas from this story, what would the two or three most powerful thoughts or sentences be?
2. Consider any of these guiding questions...
  - Who or what helped you change for the better something about yourself or your life?
  - Who or what helped inspire you to pursue a particular direction or change?
  - How did that happen? Tell that story...
  - What obstacles did you overcome?
  - How did the struggle help make you who you are today?
  - What about this person or event helped you change?
  - What joy or satisfaction in your current life came from this?
3. Carefully reflect on the appropriateness of your story for your student audience. The line between personally compelling and “over sharing” is a vital one to draw.
4. Be transparent:
  - I felt strongly about (wanting to learn or do or become...)
    - o because (internal and external factors)
    - o and so...
5. Describe, using specific details, important elements that contributed to your accomplishment of this goal or change that you cared so deeply about. Naming the personal strengths that you used can help your students make similar connections for themselves.

# REFERENCES



Below is a list of resources that were referenced within this strategy document. You will find links to research and additional information that may be helpful as you continue your understanding of the content in this strategy.

## Even If...

- Current research by Dr. Richard Davidson, world-renowned neuroscientist, and others at the Center for Investigating Healthy Minds can provide hope to adult caregivers of children.

Davidson, R., Dunne, J., Eccles, J., Engle, A., Greenberg, M., Jennings, P., Vago, D. (2012). Contemplative Practices and Mental Training: Prospects for American Education. *Child Development Perspectives*, 6(2), 146-153. doi:10.1111/j.1750-8606.2012.00240.x