



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
- Large rubber ball for bouncing
- 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 Rain Brings Frogs: A Little Book of Hope by Maryann Cocca-Leffler




OPTIMISTIC THINKING



MAIN POINTS: What is resilience? (5 minutes)

We can learn new ways to feel better, sooner, after we get disappointed or frustrated. This is called resilience.

Our brains can get quicker and stronger at helping us feel calm sooner, and keep on trying even when things are hard, if we practice this kind of thinking.



GUIDING LANGUAGE

I am very excited because I have learned that brain researchers have discovered everybody can become more resilient than we are now. Resilient means being able to bounce back to feel calm and okay after something hard or disappointing has happened to us. It's what helps us keep trying even when things aren't the way we wish they were.

We can learn how to bounce back sooner by practicing thinking in resilient ways. When somebody cuts in front of us in line, we might get a rush of feelings, like anger, sadness, or frustration. That's a time when we can take a deep breath and think of our bounce language.

Our bounce words today are "even if..."

Even if someone cuts in front of me in line—BOUNCE!—I am still going to get inside, right along with everyone else.

Even if someone cuts in front of me in line—BOUNCE!—I can use my words and ask them to go to the end of the line.

Let's try another one...

Even if nobody invites me to play when we go outside—BOUNCE!—I can invite someone to play with me!

Even if nobody invites me to play when we go outside—BOUNCE!—Solicit ideas from participants. If needed, reframe ideas so that the alternatives are within the child's control. "I can read or swing on my own" rather than "Maybe someone will ask me tomorrow."

Keep this big idea about "even if" language in mind as you listen to this story. Let's see how Nate can BOUNCE what seems not-so-great into something he can really feel good about!

Read the book you've selected. (6 minutes. Examples below are from Rain Brings Frogs.)



OPTIMISTIC THINKING



MAIN POINTS: “Even if…” language

- If we recognize that we’re having an upset feeling, we can learn to have more control over how we will react to it.
- Using the same words each time we’re trying to change our reaction helps our brains recognize the familiar language and associate it with the desired behavior.
- Have participants use examples from the text as evidence of situations in which characters could or did notice and shift their reactions.



GUIDING LANGUAGE (5 minutes)

Let’s think together about things that happened in the story that Nate decides to think about differently...

Even if it’s raining—BOUNCE!—Nate thinks.... Solicit from participants: Rain brings frogs!

Even if my friend doesn’t think there’s enough to share—BOUNCE!—I can share some of mine.

Even if I don’t really like the way this scarf looks—BOUNCE!—Solicit from participants: It keeps me warm!

Turn to a neighbor and tell each other one more thing you remember from the story that Nate bounced into feeling okay about. Pause.



MAIN POINTS: Guided practice with “even if…” language (10 minutes)

- Consider using a developmentally appropriate idea from your own [Optimistic Thinking Teacher/Facilitator Action Story Map](#) to launch this guided practice brainstorm.
- Have participants draw from their own real or hypothetical experiences to brainstorm a list of situations, recording them on the board or a chart paper as “even if…” sentence stems.
- For each example, collect two to four ideas from participants to underscore the fact that there are many ways to reframe our thinking about the same situation.



GUIDING LANGUAGE

Practicing noticing what we’re feeling when something doesn’t go our way, or is frustrating or hard, will help us be in charge of how we react. If we use the same words often, our brain starts to recognize them. “Oh, this is familiar! I’ve thought like this another time!” This helps us get faster at moving from the hard feelings to feeling better and in charge of ourselves.

Think for a moment about something that could happen that might make a person feel disappointed or frustrated at first. Pause. Turn to a neighbor and tell your own idea. Pause for partner conversations.




OPTIMISTIC THINKING

Raise your hand if your partner had an idea that we could use to help our group think about ways to bounce back. Call on several participants and have them share their partners' good ideas.

Invite one of the partnerships to come stand by you. Give the big bouncy ball to the partner who shared the idea with the group. In a minute, I'll ask you to bounce the ball so that (name) can catch it easily. Before you bounce the ball to (name), you'll say the hard thing that could happen, starting with "Even if..." When (name) catches the ball, s/he will take a deep breath and then say one idea of something a person could do to think differently and feel better. Let's try once with me catching the ball. Model reframing the language and return the ball to the first participant.

Now you'll bounce it to (name). When you bounced it to me, you looked at my eyes and gave a little nod. That helped me know you were going to try to make it easy for me to catch the ball. I appreciated that. (Name), are you ready with an answer that's different than mine, or do you want help from the group?

Continue with as many demonstrations as time and attention permit, inviting new pairs of students/participants up after two or three reframes for each idea. Let the participant who is catching the ball get ideas from group members for the variations, if they desire.



MAIN POINT: Reflection (3 minutes)

Provide private thinking time for participant reflection.



GUIDING LANGUAGE

We're going to close with some private thinking time." Pause for the group to settle into silence. Answer to yourself, silently, in your heart: Do I sometimes feel upset or mad when things don't go the way I want them to? Pause. How quickly do I usually stop feeling upset? Pause. Practice saying "even if," silently, to yourself, taking a deep breath in and letting it out with no noise. Do that a couple more times: "Even if," deep breath in, out with no noise. Once more: "Even if..."



MAIN POINT: Closure (1 minute)

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



OPTIMISTIC THINKING



GUIDING LANGUAGE

For the rest of today, let's all pay special attention to the thoughts and feelings we have when things feel hard, in big or small ways. Let's try to use "Even if..." thinking to help move through the upset feelings and bounce into feeling very in charge of ourselves. 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 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