

Hope Is More Than Just Wishful Thinking

My hope is that my students develop problem-solving skills.

By Janette Boazman, Ph.D.

Every day, we hear parents, teachers, and students use the word *hope*, but what exactly does it mean? When we read or hear the word, we might think of a positive thought, outlook, or desire. However, it's a nebulous word. It implies that something will automatically or magically occur without effort. And, although having an optimistic outlook is important to overall well-being, an individual with an unstructured, immeasurable concept of hope creates a vague expectation—almost as if the individual is a passive bystander

waiting for an outcome to happen.

What happens when hope is viewed as an active construct? Studies have found that, when used in a proactive manner, hope can become a useful framework to help achieve goals (Snyder, 1995) and contribute to personal and psychological well-being.

Positive Psychology: A Strengths Approach

Historically, psychologists have approached the study of psychological well-

being from a deficit perspective, focusing on treating and alleviating pathologies (Seligman, 2003). Over time, psychologists have taken an increasingly proactive and positive approach to the study and development of individuals and their happiness. Positive psychologists focus on developing the individual's strengths, fostering the growth of positive responses to adversity, and strengthening social and emotional foundations in the individual's life (Diener, 2000). They study well-being, contentment, and satisfaction with the

I hope my child has success in mathematics again this year.



Editor's Note: Gifted children do not stop being gifted when they walk in the door after school. Parents and caregivers see the whole child, and often need resources on personal and social growth to ensure their gifted children reach their potential. Starting with this issue, Parenting for High Potential introduces a new column devoted exclusively to perspectives related to giftedness and social/emotional development.

past, flow and happiness in the present, and optimism for the future (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

Hope is one of many positive psychological constructs that contribute to a person's well-being. Menninger (1959) was one of the first to study hope as a psychological construct by defining hope as the positive expectation for attaining goals. He presented the idea that hope, while a basic part of daily human operation, was ill-defined and obscure. Menninger theorized that some mental illness reflected a lack of hope; he believed successful treatment included reestablishing hope for those who were suffering.

Contemporary researchers have continued to build upon a strengths approach to examining the role of hope in psychological well-being (Snyder, Irving, & Anderson, 1991; Snyder, Rand, Sigmon, Snyder, & Lopez, 2002). Hope is the link between goals dreamed today and the attainment of those goals in the future (Snyder et al., 1991). Hopeful individuals view themselves as being able to create paths (pathways thinking) to achieve their goals; they initiate steps (agency thinking) toward achieving goals and sustain their course along a route to success.

What Hope Research Tells Us

C. R. Snyder and his team of contemporary researchers have written about hopefulness. Snyder developed the Adult Dispositional Hope Scale and the Children's Hope Scale to offer researchers an active, measureable framework for the study of hope. Using Snyder's hope scales, research has found that high-hope individuals:

- Are able to set goals, make flexible plans to achieve the goals they set, and then take action toward goal attainment. When comparing high-hope and low-hope individuals, high-hopers think more positively about themselves, set higher goals, and select more goals.

- Have a stronger belief in the likelihood that they will achieve their goals. They focus on success.
- Possess self-referential beliefs in situations of adversity. Those who are hopeful have an undercurrent of internal self-statements such, "I can," "I'll make it," and "I won't give up."
- Trust in themselves to be able to adjust to prospective trouble and losses (Snyder, LaPointe, Crowson, & Early, 1998).

On the other hand, individuals lacking hope:

- Believe pathways to their goals are unavailable to them; they set low goals and have a sense of uncertainty and failure about being able to achieve their goals.

- Have a tendency to experience negative emotions when working toward their goals (Snyder, 1994).

Hope and the Gifted

Research on the contribution of hope to the overall well-being of gifted learners and the long-term importance on school outcomes is just beginning (Valle, Huebner, & Suldo, 2006). So far, researchers have found that gifted students with high hope achieve successful school-related outcomes, demonstrate higher success on standardized achievement tests (Snyder, 1997), and set higher global academic goals and expectancies of success (Curry, Snyder, Cook, Ruby, & Rehm, 1997). Students with low hope have a higher occur-



I hope I make friends at my new school.

rence of anxiety (Snyder et al., 1996) and self-doubt (Snyder, 1999).

High-hope students don't belittle themselves when they're not successful. They don't let their failures affect their ultimate sense of worth, but rather attribute their failure to a lack of effort or strategies for success (Snyder, Lopez, Shorey, Rand, & Feldman, 2003). High-hope students have superior academic and interpersonal satisfactions when compared to those who have low hope.

Researchers have also examined levels of hopefulness and the contribution hope makes to personal well-being in college freshman honors and early entrants, with a subsequent check in during their sophomore year (Boazman, 2010). Findings include:

- Being hopeful was strongly associated with positive personal well-being.
- Gifted students who enter college with a higher sense of hope experience greater positive feelings of overall personal well-being initially and after one year in college (Boazman, 2010; Boazman, Saylor, & Eastonbrooks, 2012).
- Honors college students who enter college with a strong ability to identify multiple paths toward goals appear to have moved toward achieving those goals after one year of college.

Increasing Student Hope

Although children in America generally feel hopeful (Snyder et al., 2003), all children do not have the same level of hopefulness. At times, gifted children can find themselves in settings that are socially and intellectually stagnant. Gifted students may have a hard time finding intellectual peers and stimulating cognitive challenges commensurate with their abilities in a regular classroom (Gross, 2004). Therefore, school can seem hopeless without goal-setting skills, without identifying paths to attain goals, and with low confidence toward accomplishing goals. Ideally, parents, teachers, and counselors should collaborate to help the child develop goal-setting skills and to identify pathways that will

“Hope is the link between goals dreamed today and the attainment of those goals in the future.”

(Snyder et al., 1991)

lead to goal attainment. As a team, they should create a plan and process in moving forward to support the child's efforts toward accomplishing those goals.

Setting goals. Teaching goal setting is foundational to assisting gifted children in their development of hopefulness. Gifted children need to be active participants in setting their own personal, social, and academic goals. In early grades, gifted students should be encouraged to set simple, clear, specific goals that move them toward getting something accomplished (approach goals) rather than avoiding something (avoidance goals). As the child ages, goal setting can become more complex. Listing and ranking goals help students learn the skill of prioritizing. Setting multiple goals should be encouraged in middle and high school, as multiple goals offer a fallback position if students encounter a difficult obstacle. Students must also be taught how to identify and set markers of success.

Developing pathways thinking. Parents and educators can help gifted students develop pathways thinking by breaking down larger goals into smaller components that are approached, and eventually completed, in a sequenced and logical way. Students should identify multiple routes to both small and large goals and practice overcoming obstacles. This teaches them to become flexible thinkers. When stu-

dents become stuck, it's important they do not attribute the inability to move forward to a lack of talent. Rather, students should see obstructions as pathways that do not work. If a pathway is identified as unfeasible, students must learn the skills to switch lanes and find alternate routes to take them toward their goal.

Developing personal meaning or “agency” thinking. It's essential that children set goals that are their own—with personal meaning—rather than assume the goals of their peers, teachers, or parents. Motivation, persistence, and performance are undermined if the goals are not personal. Gifted children should also set “stretch” goals, keep a journal of internal dialogue, and engage in team-related activities to foster personal meaning. In addition, developing memories of positive experiences, either through personal successes or by example of others, helps keep gifted children resilient when they face difficulty reaching their goals.

The aim of those who parent and educate gifted individuals is for academic success and happiness, so students flourish throughout their lives. Hope, when framed as a goal-directed and active process, helps students thrive academically and personally. Hope, then, is much more than wishful thinking about a positive outcome. When the gifted are able

to set goals, see multiple routes to goals, and can move toward the attainment of those goals, then they have hope for reaching their goals. So, the next time you use or hear the word hope, think twice about what it means and your role in helping those who are hopeful attain their goals. ☺

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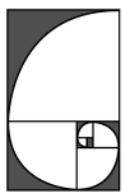
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