

Positive Penguins



When Sara Price (left) was 9, she tried a positive psychology exercise given to her by her mom Meg, who runs her own workplace and leadership consulting business. Sara liked what she learned, and

thought it could help kids who feel overwhelmed by problems such as bullying and feeling anxious. She created a school presentation with penguins, since “they’re one of the most resilient animals on earth,” she says. Students and parents loved it, so Sara and her family helped develop an app for kids called Positive Penguins. Sara, now 15, explains how the way you think about a troubling situation can change the outcome.

Positive psychology focuses on improving our mental wellbeing rather than focusing only on treating mental health symptoms. It gives us tools to feel more positive, deal with challenges and be more resilient, and be the best we can be. Our feelings are not “right” or “wrong.” Feelings are like bits of information that tell us something about the situation. Sometimes our thoughts can make our feelings worse; sometimes our thoughts make our feelings better. If we focus on our negative thoughts, this usually results in more negative feelings. Sometimes our negative thoughts correctly reflect a situation, but they often lead us to believe that things are worse than they really are.

You can start now by simply paying attention to all the feelings you have each day. Notice whether your thoughts or the stories you tell yourself about those feelings have helped you or made things worse.

My Positive Penguins app gets kids to think about how they are feeling and why, and question whether they can see things more realistically or more helpfully. It has helped me and my friends and brothers when we are feeling annoyed or frustrated

or sad to understand what stories we are telling ourselves and decide whether those stories might not be true. For example, when I was



Positive Penguin buddy wants to know what you would say to a friend who is feeling like you with the same negative thought? He feels that we are often better at helping our friends than we are at helping ourselves.



Type in your answers to figure out feelings.

younger, I’d get really annoyed if I couldn’t do my math homework, and I’d start thinking I was just really bad at math. But the penguins reminded me that I could also get more help to understand my math. Now, I’m in 9th grade, and I enjoy math—and I’m quite good at it. Without penguin help, I’d believe I’m bad at math.

I really enjoyed making this app, especially designing the penguins and the clothes you can choose for them with the app. I love art, and I wanted the app to look appealing. Helping to create the app back then got me interested in all the different aspects of using technology to make things better for kids. I’ve since released the Family Fun and Christmas Fun apps. They’re both fun, simple, and free apps that include conversations starters, charades, and a few other mini-games. I teamed with a classmate who can code apps, so it didn’t even cost anything to make! I’m now working on another app that helps people feel more positive.

Over the past few years, I’ve learned a lot from groups and projects that encourage girls (and boys) to learn more about technology. Recently, I gave presentations about this at conferences where I live in Australia and elsewhere. Check out resources like these near you—maybe you’ll create your own app!

Does using positive psychology mean you chase away negative thoughts? NO! All our feelings give us information that can guide our thoughts and actions. Let’s say a friend was hurtful. You notice that you are sad and angry. It is important to feel and acknowledge these feelings. Now, what outcome do you want? You want her or him to apologize and not do it. You also don’t want to be sad and angry. You can get advice on options from friends and family. You could write a note or have a conversation with the friend who was hurtful describing your feelings and asking for what you want. It may not work immediately (or at all). You may feel sad and angry again. But each time, you can observe your feelings and choose what to do.