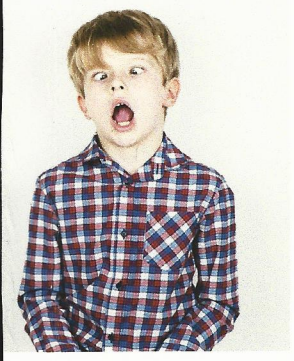
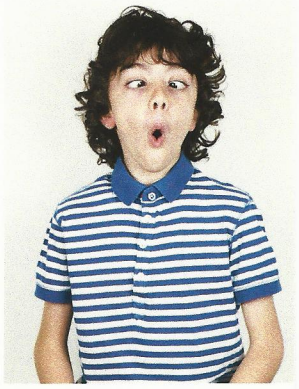
TIME

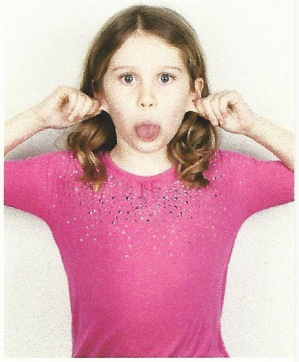
SPECIAL EDITION

The Science of Childhood

Inside the Minds of Our Younger Selves



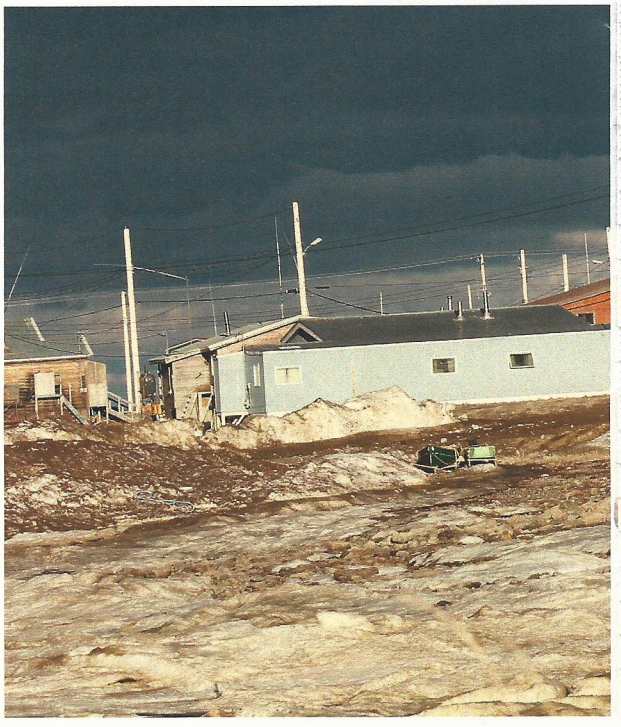




How to Raise Hopeful Kids

OPTIMISM—IN THE RIGHT DOSES—CAN HELP MAKE CHILDREN RESILIENT IN THE FACE OF LIFE'S SETBACKS

BY DAVID BJERKLIE



"It's the Force, just like in *Star Wars*," says Ethan Tassiuk excitedly. "It is the strongest feeling, deep, deep, deep down inside of your heart, a feeling that no matter how hard it gets and how much it hurts, that there is another way to go on." Yes, says Ethan with a nod, this is what *niraijungniq* (the Inuktitut word for "hope") means to him.

It is a late June evening, still bathed in twilight, in the Inuit community of Arviat, on Hudson Bay, in the Canadian Arctic territory of Nunavut. Ethan sits at a dining-room table fielding questions about the power of hope. The questions are being asked by a friend, Arviat TV co-producer Jamie Bell. Bell has known the 19-year-old since Ethan was a shy 12-year-old showing up for his first meeting of the Arviat Film Society, a group of young community filmmakers who have made films on topics such as suicide prevention and bullying, relationships, sexual health, the wisdom of elders—and even an Arctic horror movie.

It is an especially poignant conversation because hope—or its absence—is at the heart of nearly everything in Arviat,

Top: An Inuit child plays in Arviat, Nunavut; bottom: the Canadian town of Arviat is home to nearly 3,000 people.

a community rich in Inuit culture and traditions but one that also struggles with isolation, poverty, unemployment and suicide. How do you measure hope? How do you support it and share it? For the people of Arviat—for all of us—how do you impart hope to the next generation?

Hope is fundamental to humanity, but that doesn't mean we don't have very mixed views about it. In Greek mythology, Zeus cursed humankind for the actions of Prometheus, who stole fire from the gods, by giving Pandora a vessel she was not to open under any circumstances. When she disobeyed, out streamed all the evils of the world. Only hope remained, by which the torments of mortality might be endured.

Yet several Greek philosophers saw hope as only one more torment. Sophocles considered it a human foible that only prolonged suffering. Euripides saw it as a "curse upon humanity." Twenty-three hundred years later, 19th-century German philosophers Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche also rejected hope as folly and false promise; Nietzsche, in fact, thought that of all the torments Zeus had brought down on humans, hope was the worst.

But hope has its champions, too. Psychologists understand hope as what links our goals with the means by which we pursue them. Yes, hope can be empty or desperate, but it also embodies our desires, our determination and our expectations of success. Think in terms of the children's classic *The Little Engine That Could*, whose titular subject's goal of delivering toys, dolls, fresh fruit and milk to the kids who lived over the mountain began with "I think I can, I think I can" and ended with "I thought I could, I thought I could."

The most prominent modern theorist of hope, the psychologist C.R. Snyder, also thought of hope as a journey. In addition to a destination, the journey requires a map and means of transportation (what Snyder referred to as waypower) and the energy and determination (the willpower) to put the plan into motion.

The foundations of hope, according to Snyder and his colleagues, begin early in life. Newborns quickly learn the connection of

goals and agency "because their survival depends on such 'this follows that' chronologies," he wrote. Infants refine their abilities as "they anticipate and plan for events," which leads to learning to point to desired objects, which in turn "signals the infant's ability to single out one goal and even recruit an adult's help to obtain it."

Believing that goals are achievable is what many kids find difficult. Kids with pessimistic explanatory styles often see their problems as originating from within and likely to be open-ended and permanent, while optimists see adversity as coming from external sources and likely to be specific and temporary. In this sense, hope is a theory of a child's world. "I wouldn't think of it as innate, however," says David Anderson, senior director of ADHD and Behavior Disorders at the Child Mind Institute in New York. "Kids are influenced by so many

Left: The power of family and Inuit community and culture are used in the schools in art and education programs. Above: In a community where nearly 40% of the population is under age 14, hope is both a challenge and an opportunity.

factors. We all fall into behavioral patterns, ways we automatically think about things."

These patterns can become part of our personal narratives, the stories we tell ourselves about who we are and how we got here, as well as where we've been, where we're headed and how far we can go. Such patterns of thought can become ingrained, but fortunately they may not be quite as hard to undo as we might assume. "What we are trying to do when kids come in with symptoms of depression or anxiety is to identify the patterns of thinking that lead to their feelings of hopelessness," says Anderson. "We help them talk back to their thoughts, to initiate patterns that are more likely to lead to a sense of hope. We help them think about problems as solvable, as challenges they can face and break down into smaller pieces. All of these tools are in the service of building hope for the future, a sense that things can change and get better."

Goals can range from specific and immediate to abstract and remote. "One of the keys to helping kids is looking at their goals," says Beth Doll, a professor of educational psychology at the University of Nebraska. "What do they want to achieve? What do they want to accomplish? For younger kids, those are going to be goals over a few weeks or a few months. With older kids, we're looking at goals over a year. And by the time they are juniors and seniors, we start to see goals over a lifetime."

As is the case for the closely related research subjects of optimism, resilience and grit, there is no consensus on how malleable our sense of hope is. Certainly a great many factors, from neurological to familial to social, interact to bolster children's sense of hope—or rob them of it. While researchers try to untangle the interactions, mental-health professionals, as well as educators, meet hope where it lives. The goal is to encourage and cultivate the sense of hope in all children but never blame the hopeless. "There's no specifically hope-focused intervention," says Anderson. "We don't diagnose anything based on hope. But much of what we do, in cognitive behavior therapy and other treatment, centers on building hope."

A key component of these efforts is the social-emotional-learning programs many schools are adopting. "I think there's increasing recognition of how social, emotional and cognitive functioning are intermingled," says researcher Lisa Flook of the University of Wisconsin. "The potential impact of such programs in the forefront of education is enormous." Anderson believes this is already happening: "One of the most encouraging trends we are seeing is that schools are recognizing how closely connected mental health and academic performance are."

A generation ago, Snyder and his colleagues believed that "hopeful thinking can empower and guide a lifetime of learning." As Jamie and Ethan know from their experiences working with the youth in Arviat, it can also empower lives. "What gives people the strength to have hope?" That's a great question, says Bell. "Because when we ask how it works, the answers help us build hope in ways we can share."