



# THE INFLUENCE OF OPTIMISM FROM GOOD PARENTING TO GREAT LEADERSHIP **Kelly Rippon**

Imagine having the power to effect change without forcing it to happen—possessing an invisible yet persuasive presence that can sway the people and things around us in a positive way. Guess what? We all have this power. It's called influence.

Influence is not meant to be intimidating or demanding. It isn't manipulative or magical. Influence is certainly powerful, but it's also casual and inviting.

Long-standing leaders who intentionally use influence are successful because they're patient. They understand that their influence needs to gradually grow in power over time to make a deep impression.

But the influencer with the most power to effect change in today's world is the parent. A parent has the greatest opportunity to be the most significant influence in their child's life. The voice of a credible parent surpasses the pull of social media or enticing trends. As parents build their credibility, they promote a trustful atmosphere where children feel safe and develop solid self-esteem. When a child's confidence climbs, their success is inevitable. It sounds easy, but being a parent today is complicated.

Too often, parents are offered advice that is untested by the person giving it, frequently requiring a large support system and a larger bank account to execute it. These over-promised ideas often lead parents to failure. They end up feeling more stressed and less confident in their abilities.

What if I told you that good parenting can develop into great leadership? That using the influential behaviors found in solid leadership to empower your kids is free and only requires you, the parent, to set it into action? What if I also told you that consistently practicing these influences will inspire you and, over time, will improve everything around you?

No doubt, being an effective parent requires a dynamic skill set, because parenting is more than being a caregiver. It's about leading and inspiring others to have an optimistic outlook. It's about using the right words and developing the best habits. It's about having the grace to deliver bad news and the empathy to compassionately explain it. Parenting isn't a uniform that you put on and take off. When we Parent Up, we practice an uplifting ideology that includes the best influences. It helps us see the upside of life and focus on the positive aspects in the experiences we encounter. When practiced over time, amazing things of Olympic-sized proportions can happen.

## THE INFLUENCE OF OPTIMISM

Have you ever wondered what the common thread was between kids who seemed to flourish despite challenging hardships or diverse backgrounds? I believe it's optimism. Optimism is a state where all things thrive. Optimists are upbeat, complain less, and are reported to live longer. Who wouldn't want to be an optimist? It sounds like a no-brainer. Unfortunately, there isn't an "optimist switch" that we can click to lift us up. It's easy to be optimistic when good results are likely, but in order to live it and to truly have it in your heart, you must embrace it in the hard times, the times that feel like defeat. Sometimes even the most upbeat people can be tempted by the ease of pessimism. Pessimism makes it easy to blame and distrust. While it requires less effort, it's lonely and defeating.

That's the headspace I was in after my divorce. I was overwhelmed and knew I needed to restore my optimism. I started the process of reorganizing and purging the clutter after my ex-husband moved out of my house. I knew I needed to exercise the influence of optimism to assess and reorganize my surroundings. I did it with the hope of uncovering hidden opportunities; I wanted to make room for growth and increase my sense of hopefulness. It's normal for motivation and frustration to wrestle for the center stage of each day after any kind of life-changing event. Understandably, there were ups and downs. Some days I felt like I was Wonder Woman, and other days I just wondered what I was doing.

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During the first few weeks after my divorce, I felt enormous pressure, and I remember coping by telling myself that what was happening wasn't real. I believe this is called denial. Looking back now, I can see that my early decision-making was fueled by fear. I refer to this time of transition as operating with "divorce muscles," a puffed-up feeling of confidence inflated by radical change. It took some time to find my own voice. I discovered that the more I exercised optimism, the more I was able to create an objective space.

## **OPTIMISM IGNITES INSPIRATION**

Divorce can prompt some women to schedule an appointment with a plastic surgeon or motivate others to join a gym. I, on the other hand, planned a visit to my local Home Depot. I was on a mission to restore the love and transform my house into a home. Home Depot became my favorite superstore of potential optimism. This home improvement shop was my safe space after my divorce. I wandered up and down the aisles in awe, surrounded by one hundred thousand square feet of new ideas that promised to improve, restore, and organize my life. Home Depot was my new boyfriend and the perfect companion—one I needed to stay motivated to keep getting out of bed each morning. Here's a tip for beginning optimists: make your first goal achievable, so that it's possible to win the day. My first goal was simply to get out of bed and just show up for the day. That was it, and most days I nailed it.

Not surprisingly, I had some struggles connecting to gratitude after my divorce, and I knew I had to change what I saw outside of myself to improve what I felt on the inside.

Changing what we see around us can prompt us to change what we feel.  
We are products of our environment.

**When we trust our environment, solitude isn't lonely, it is restorative.**

I learned that creating a home that elevates hope isn't about luxurious surroundings—it's about building a nurturing space in which to recharge and revive. I was beginning to see the potential my changes offered as polishing my life up instead of sanding it down. I was determined to restore the luster to our lives.

I returned to my big-box transformation sanctuary several times a month for inspiration, filling my cart with cleaners, brushes, paints, ceramic tiles, concrete pavers, and whatever else I envisioned could wash away the negative residue of my relationship failure and fill the noticeable emptiness with color, direction, and purpose. There were so many changes that we all had to steer through. I believed the kids and I needed objective guidance, and I was excited after each trip to return home and reengage in the love restoration.

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## OPTIMISM ASKS US TO LET GO

Sometimes clutter can be troublesome. It isn't always about having a lack of space or messy habits. Sometimes clutter comes from the inability to detach and let go. When kids feel more in control, it is easier for them to decide to donate, discard, or pass down things they outgrow. I never asked them to say goodbye to a toy they chose to donate. I asked them to say thank you to their doll or stuffed animal or favorite sleeping bag or whatever they selected to give away. I helped them see that they weren't giving up anything; instead, they were told they were gaining space for something better. Developing the ability to let go of things that were once a treasure to us but no longer serve us brings far more value to a child's development than just a tidy room.

Over the years of meeting and observing thousands of people—whether they were students, clients, friends, or teachers—I grew to understand that simplicity and emotional order have a connection. Tidying up isn't just for things. It's for our feelings too. I lived by this emotional anti-clutter theory and shared it with my children. It's important to get clarity about our feelings and to let go of the beliefs that don't serve us anymore, allowing room for a more optimistic outlook. Optimists are less likely to get lost sorting through past hurts or trying to relive past achievements. Optimists seek order.

The physical transformation of my surroundings reflected the emotional changes within me, as well as those that I hoped to help my kids foster. The process served as a living metaphor. I was putting everything in its place, literally by tossing or storing things and figuratively by offering my former treasures the proper perspective on how I wanted to prioritize their meaning in my head. As order grew, so did my optimism.

## HOW TO OPTIMIZE YOUR OPTIMISM

As a corporate consultant, I commonly shared strategies with managers that would help them more effectively lead their teams through change. Unexpected company transitions and management shuffling often resulted in lower morale. I used the best of these suggestions—hold a meeting off-site, prioritize your worry, align your talent, and create a smile file—in my own transition as a single mom to boost my attitude and to feed my motivation. I found it helpful not just to ignite optimism but also to keep it conditioned by exercising it. These corporate initiatives helped me cross-train and optimize my optimism workout. They did more than help me conjure up a positive mindset when I faced a challenge; they helped me hold on to a positive mindset when I wasn't being tested.

**VISITING OPTIMISM |** Much like a business client would ask me how they could recharge their staff, I found that the same four-step plan worked for elevating optimism in my house. The first recommendation I would give to my corporate clients would be to schedule a meeting off-site to inspire and trigger creativity. Being in an unfamiliar place awakens our senses. For families, getting out of the house even for short periods is a spirit booster. A visit to a park or a neighborhood walk can also be recharging. There is a university a few blocks from our home. It has a lovely campus with a large pond. The kids and I would go there to walk, sit on the benches that surrounded the pond, and watch the water show from the majestic fountain anchored at the center. We called it mini-Paris because it reminded them of the pictures I shared with them from my travels. As parents, we have the power to sanction any place as special, and when we bring our kids to those places, they feel special.

**PROTECT YOUR OPTIMISM |** Secondly, I would advise clients to schedule and prioritize their worry. A company's productivity suffers when unmanaged stress and excessive worry infiltrate the workplace. It's only a matter of time before efficiency drops and targets are missed. A solid manager doesn't contaminate their team with undue anxiety. This is also true for parents' interactions with their children. I learned to manage the daily stress I encountered by scheduling all of my worries to be addressed at one time, usually at the end of the day.

As a single parent, I didn't have a partner to offer a second opinion. I would get sidetracked or feel pressured to make uninformed decisions on the spot, only to regret them later. I learned that if I could solve the problem right away, I would. If not, I would write it down. I postponed the worry and the stress of the problem until the evening, so that they didn't corrupt my day. This gave me more time to investigate options. I would look over the list I had created that night and prepare a solution plan for the next day. I contained the worry until I could unpack it with the proper tools and a calmer attitude to construct the best strategy possible. I taught this practice to my kids. It was especially useful for coping with the demands of high school and when they started college. It helped them stay in the moment of the day and not get overwhelmed by the demands of the semester or the year. They learned to take command of the issues and create a multistep action plan. Having this skill made it less likely that they would fall into pessimistic thinking where they could easily get overwhelmed.

Sometimes clutter comes from the inability to detach and let go.

**INDIVIDUAL OPTIMISM |** The third suggestion that limits the spread of negativity in the workplace is having a one-to-one communication and aligning the talent or task accordingly. Miscommunication and team dysfunction aren't isolated to business. People mistakenly think that relationship issues occur in business environments because businesses are often teams made of strangers. Likewise, it's flawed thinking to assume that people in a family are more likely to get along because they are related. It's a myth that children raised by the same parents will have the same personality styles. If you have more than one child, spend time and provide opportunities to speak with each of them individually. Kids need to feel heard. Raising a family with more than one child presents multiple degrees of complexity. Some kids are more extroverted, and some are more attuned to detail, which helps them communicate more clearly about their needs. Sometimes these personality styles can overshadow a more introverted child. It's important for each child to have his or her own chance to communicate who they are without the dominance of a sibling overstepping them. When kids feel heard, they are reminded of their value.

**FILE YOUR OPTIMISM |** The fourth step for increasing optimism is to rely on facts and evidence of achievements. I encourage all my corporate clients to keep a "smile file." It's a collection of achievements, photos, or records of proud moments. It's helpful to take a minute to view this smile file to pump up confidence before an interview or presentation. I encouraged the kids to display their trophies and awards in their bedrooms. They were more likely to see them and be reminded of their achievements. I wanted their trophies and awards to be in their personal space to help them feel ownership of their efforts. I refrained from displaying the kids' achievements in common areas of our home, unless they placed them there themselves. I wanted them to compete with the person they were yesterday instead of competing with each other.



**YOUR OPTIMISTIC STYLE |** Make your own plan for boosting your optimism that complements your family's interests and available resources. By changing things up, scheduling your worry, aligning communication to your family's personality styles, and collecting evidence of achievements, your optimism will be in optimal shape. Optimism is a style. It's the way we see things and are seen by others, and it's important to wear it every day.

## **OPTIMISM ACTIVATES OUR BEST SELF**

Living optimistically requires practice. Pausing and intentionally searching our brains for the best-case scenario can be frustrating at first, but over time and with repetition, we naturally gravitate toward the most hopeful outcome, and it eventually becomes a pattern. Unexpected interruptions can challenge us. I have spent the better part of this century driving in the car to or from somewhere. Traffic jams on major interstates can be stressful. If we let our lack of control of the situation get to us, it ignites the impatient, angry road warrior waiting to rage out. When the kids were in the car, it generally wasn't a problem for me to be on my best behavior. Somehow when I didn't have the accountability of a dozen eyes watching my every reaction to not getting my way, I sometimes lost my cool and wasn't my best self.

One day I was traveling alone and stuck in traffic, inching along the highway. Drivers were beeping and preventing others from merging, and I was caught up in the annoyance of trying to protect my ten feet of space on the road. The car next to me was trying to wedge in front of me, and I was not having it. I was running late. It was my lane and not her turn. Then I noticed the driver next to me lower her window and wave at me.

She looked panicked. I lowered my window and looked at her. She shouted, "Please let me go. I need to get to the hospital. My mother had an accident." Hearing that impassioned request, I felt called to action. I no longer felt stuck in traffic. I felt invited to be a better person in the next minute than I was in the one before. I signaled for her to go. The slowed traffic gave me time to think.

I realized that traffic frustration is conditional. Most of us think the worst of people who drive aggressively, cut us off, or move into what we see as our space. I know I did. That pushes us to think that we are being cheated or that someone is doing something to us that is unfair. When we hold that mindset, we tend to get protective and assert an aggressive response in return. I realized that when I knew why a driver was trying to advance, I immediately moved from feeling like a victim to feeling called upon to be a hero. I felt powerful. After that day, I saw every traffic jam, every misguided lane-changer and speeding motorist as an opportunity to lead and decide to generously offer my ten feet of road space. I understood that I may not have control over the traffic, but I did have control over how I responded to it. The difference between perceiving yourself as a victim and seeing yourself as a leader is the amount of power you feel. It is easier to stay in charge of our emotions when we keep our power and don't squander it in a burst of anger or jump to the assumption that we are being victimized.

**Optimism is a style. It's the way we see things and are seen by others, and it's important to wear it every day.**

## THE POWER OF OPTIMISM

We can explain optimism to our kids and live as an optimistic role model, but inevitably it is a personal decision for them to think optimistically. I created rules that empowered them to make decisions that affected others to practice optimistic thinking. One of these rules may seem more like a courtesy, but it was an expectation in our home. If they encountered the following issue, it was up to them to frame a response and consider the consequences of it.

If you rushed to the breakfast table in excitement to start your day with the go-go power of Cheerios, proceeded to fill your bowl, and opened the refrigerator only to find just enough milk left in the container to make it happen, you would feel super lucky. But if you opened the refrigerator and found a nearly empty carton containing a few drops, or no carton at all, you would feel slighted, angry, and maybe even unlucky. Announcing that there was only one serving of milk left before they had their morning cereal gave them the power to own that four ounces of milk and own that luck. It was expected of them to ask if anyone objected if they used it. The kids who were asked appreciated having the opportunity to rethink their breakfast and troubleshoot their disappointment. Occasionally there may have been a plea that the milk was essential to one of the other kids. It was up to the child who found it first to decide the fate of the last four ounces of milk. I did not get involved. It was an expectation that gradually evolved to a common practice that the last of anything was announced. I believed that if they all knew the facts and conditions before possibly not getting what they may have wanted, it prevented them from automatically thinking that someone had taken it from them or from feeling like it was a personal slight. An optimist doesn't brag about or hoard good fortune. They know that demonstrating fairness doesn't weaken their power—it strengthens it.

## OPTIMISM IS A SHIELD

One of the most memorable incidents about optimism involved my youngest, Sawyer, when he was in first grade. His older brothers and sisters helped him study for his weekly spelling tests. He was assigned twelve words each week, and he was so excited to have homework like his siblings. He brought his first test home, and he had spelled all his words correctly, but there was a sad face drawn in red marker at the top of the page. He didn't say anything about it, so I didn't ask about it. The next two spelling tests were the same: all correct but with a red sad face marked at the top of the page. I seldom called a teacher about the kids. But the continued sad face began to bother me; it was confusing. His spelling words were correct, and I couldn't figure out why that was represented by a sad face.

I met with his teacher after school the next day. She explained that they were asked to number their papers from one to ten on the front of the page and list eleven and twelve on the back of the page. Sawyer had folded the page and made two columns. He'd listed one to ten in the far-left column and eleven and twelve in the right column. His teacher said that was unacceptable because students did not make imaginary lines for columns until third grade. She said she was surprised that he didn't ask her why she'd drawn a sad face on his paper and explained to me that she did it to show him that she was disappointed in him. I suggested that she tell Sawyer what she wanted him to do and explained that his sister, Dagny, who was in third grade, was helping him with his spelling words and most likely taught him to fold the page like she did in her class.



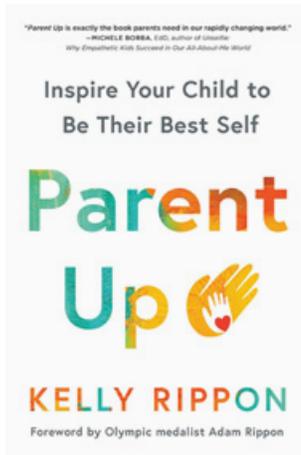
When I got home, I put the last four of Sawyer's spelling tests on the table and asked him to come and talk about it. I was worried about whether seeing a Mr. Yuck face on his correct spelling test week after week had influenced his self-esteem. He happily approached me and asked if I'd seen his teacher. I said I had and asked him to look at his tests. He said excitedly, "They're all one hundred! I am a really good speller." I agreed, then pointed to the red sad face and asked him what he thought about it. He calmly said, "I saw that. It's on all of them. Mrs. Dundee must be really mad at something."

Optimism provides a shield against our kids taking things personally and feeling hurt. He never thought the sad face was about him; he focused on getting the words spelled correctly. He was proud of meeting his goals and thought the sad face belonged to his teacher. That's the beauty of the influence of optimism.

**Optimism does more than invite happy thoughts. It protects us from feeling hurt unnecessarily. We can more easily love the life we are living when we are influenced by optimism. 📖**



# Info



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kelly Rippon, author of *Parent Up*, is the single mother of six children, including her oldest son, Olympic medalist Adam Rippon. She transformed her skills as an experienced college philosophy educator into a career as a motivational and professional development speaker, investigating how the influences people experience shape their lives. Kelly has been featured on *Hello Sunshine*, *The Players Tribune*, CNN and *Good Housekeeping* magazine.

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