

15th Annual  
Hawker Brownlow  
**Thinking &  
Learning**  
Conference

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**DONNA WILSON**

**FRIDAY 18 MAY**

**Session 1**

**Creating Practically Optimistic Classrooms**

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**MELBOURNE**

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# DR DONNA WILSON

Donna Wilson, PhD, is an educational and school psychologist whose work in cognitive education focuses on areas including cognition in the classroom, metacognition, attention, memory, motivation, and improving teaching and learning. She is an adjunct professor and lead developer of graduate programs with majors in brain-based teaching with Nova Southeastern University and head of academic affairs for the Center for Innovative Education and Prevention.



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# Creating Practically Optimistic Classrooms

It has been said that emotions are the gateway to learning and thinking. Participants will explore the basic structure of the “emotional brain” and learn why practical optimism is of critical importance for all students today. The presenter will model key strategies for creating positive learning environments where students are encouraged to learn joyfully. Additionally, educators will learn powerful strategies for guiding students to become more optimistic learners who are motivated to take appropriate learning risks when the going sometimes gets tough.

## **Objectives and Outcomes:**

- **Connecting emotions, thinking and learning**
- **Principles for creating positive learning environments**
- **Ten strategies for guiding students to become more optimistic**

## Creating Practically Optimistic Classrooms



Donna Wilson, Ph.D.  
A large part of this presentation is adapted from her book, *Introduction to BrainSMART® Teaching*.

S.tate

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## Objectives and Outcomes

- \* Connecting emotions, thinking, and learning
- \* Principles for creating positive learning environments
- \* 10 strategies for guiding students to become more optimistic

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## What is BRAINSMART.?

- An approach to teaching that supports teachers with practical strategies for teaching so students are able to learn more.
- Based upon selected psychology and brain research now known as the applied science of learning.

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## Definition: Practical Optimism

**Practical optimism:** an attitude about life that relies on taking realistic, positive action to increase the likelihood of successful results.

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Building on your prior knowledge and experience...

## Why do you think practical optimism is important?

## What research says: Why is optimism important?

The science we discuss in our book, *Positively Smarter*, indicates that optimists ...

- \* Are more creative thinkers and better problem solvers.
- \* Tend to hang in there when tasks are difficult.
- \* Have stronger relationships.
- \* Are physically healthier.
- \* Are more resilient.
- \* Perform better on the job and in personal pursuits.
- \* As a group tend to live longer.

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- \* Emphasizing positive emotions helps students to ...
- \* become more resilient, and
- \* be more likely to persevere fueled by the belief that they will triumph over difficulty, learn from their mistakes, overcome plateaus in their performance, and progress.

Conyers, M. A., & Wilson, D. L. (2015). *Positively smarter*. West Sussex, UK: Wiley Blackwell.

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## Seligman's Research on Optimism

### Fourth-Grade Student Achievement Study

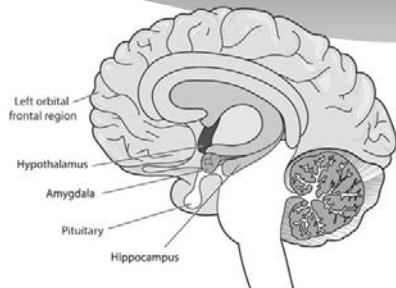
Students who were measurably more optimistic persisted to solve problems. Pessimistic fourth-graders had problem-solving skills comparable to average first-graders.



Seligman, M.E.P. (2007). *The Optimistic Child*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.

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## The Emotional Brain: Gateway to Learning and Thinking



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### Principle: Humans can learn to be more optimistic.

- \* Research indicates that roughly half of people's "baseline level of well-being," the propensity toward cheerfulness or negativity, can be attributed to DNA. The other 50% is not genetic, so it may be influenced and changed.

Lyubomirsky, S. (2007). *The How of Happiness*. New York: Penguin.

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We are able to go a long way toward creating a positive learning environment by helping students to understand that despite past ideas we now know that optimism can be learned and taught.

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## Strategy 1: Help youth realize that negative events are ...



- NOT Pervasive
- NOT Permanent
- NOT Personal

Seligman, M.E.P. (2006). *Learned optimism*. New York: Random House.

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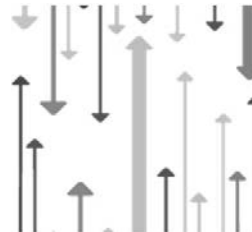
**Strategy 2: BrainSMART two-minute strategy for creating optimistic youth**



\* Think about someone you have known professionally or personally who could benefit from using this strategy.

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**Principle: Emotions and cognition are inextricably intertwined.**



Emotions and thinking are like a two-way street with each influencing the other. So, thoughts will be influenced by students' positive or negative emotions.

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**Strategy 3: Arm Test & I Feel Good, Yes! Experiment to Help Students Feel the Difference**



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**I Feel Good, Yes!**



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**Principle: Positive relating is key to a joyful learning environment.**



**Emotion and cognition are co-dependent.**  
Today fMRI and other tools show something psychologists have long believed to be true; children need *joyful learning* environments that include positive relationships.

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**Strategy 4: "Pos Tops"**




**Purpose:**  
To show caring for others and aid positive communication. It helps to create happy moments together. This strategy is intended to be deeply integrated for use both professionally and personally.

Reflect: Think about how you might use "Pos Tops" to benefit yourself and/or someone else?

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**\* Principle: Humans are wired to imitate and learn from each other.**




When we see someone do something, the same neurons they used are activated in our own brains.

Source: [www.edge.org](http://www.edge.org)


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**Strategy 5: Model optimistic teaching.**



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**Positive Purposeful Teaching: An Example**




Think of a student who was having a difficult time learning and overcame it.

My share: Embedded in Steve's story is that he perceived his weakness and that she deeply understood him and would teach him so he could succeed.

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**Bonus strategy for parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, teachers of young children...**




Brightside's story helps teachers teach children how to be optimistic thinkers so that they may have more academic success.

Wilson, D.L. & Conyers, M.A. (2016). Teaching Students to Drive Their Brains. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

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**Strategy 6: Rewire with R.A.D.A.R.**



**The RADAR process**  
for helping the brain "rewire" for practical optimism:

- Recognize negative thoughts.
- Assess the accuracy of those thoughts.
- Dispute negative thoughts.
- Alternatives for what else could be true.
- Rehearse new thinking.

**Brainsmart**  
brainsmart.org

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**Principle: When success is internalized, it can breed optimism about future successes.**



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**Strategy 7: Assist students to internalize their learning successes.**

- \* Offer daily opportunities for students to become aware of what they are learning.
- \* This strategy is for use with whole groups, individuals, and should be offer multi-modal opportunities.
- \* Royal Roundup at the end of class/or the day.
- \* Summarizing and celebrating what has been learned often.

**Empathy**



Generally speaking there are two types of empathy.

- \* Cognitive [Perspective Taking]
- \* Affective [Shared Emotional Response]

Empathy:  
<http://donnawilsonphd.blogspot.com/2017/01/edutopia-post-describes-how-to-teach.html>

**Strategy 8: Assist students to learn to show empathy by being kind toward others**

Be the rainbow in someone's cloud



**Teach students to regularly commit small acts of kindness in the classroom.** Acts of kindness lift recipients' spirits and have the boomerang effect of enhancing "the donor's" feelings of well-being and positivity.

Conyers, M. A., & Wilson, D. L. (2015). *Positively smarter*. West Sussex, UK: Wiley Blackwell.

Learning how to give a heartfelt complement or lending a hand to someone can give greater feelings of happiness and contentment.

**Strategy 9: Assist students to express gratitude often**

Walking life's path with gratitude



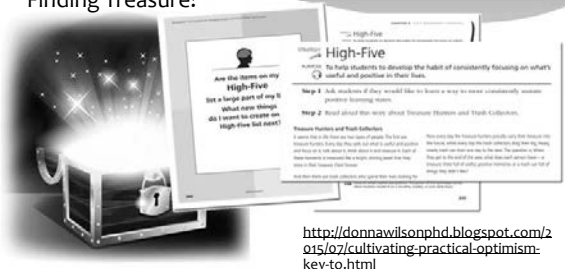
**Gratitude is an important aspect of empathy.**

- \* Lessens feelings of social isolation
- \* Enhances acting with more generosity and compassion increases joy and optimism

Conyers, M. A., & Wilson, D. L. (2015). *Positively smarter*. West Sussex, UK: Wiley Blackwell.

**Strategy 10: Teach students to be treasure hunters "High Five" Strategy**

Finding Treasure!



<http://donnawilsonphd.blogspot.com/2015/07/cultivating-practical-optimism-key-to.html>



**Bonus! Creating More Optimistic Schools**  
See article on my blog...



\* Unleashing the Power of  
Positivity in Your School

**Until we meet again:**  
Stay connected and enjoy our  
online resources!



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# Creating Practically Optimistic Classrooms

In our workshop, *Creating Practically Optimistic Classrooms*, I use the term *practical optimism* to describe an attitude about life that relies on taking realistic, positive action to increase the likelihood of successful results.

## Scientific Basis

Neuroscientists recently discovered that optimism is associated with brain pathways connecting the left prefrontal region to the amygdala. Furthermore, in recent years, research in psychology has demonstrated that optimism, traditionally considered to be an unchangeable trait, is a way of thinking that can be learned and enhanced. A common assumption is that the tendency toward optimism or pessimism is predetermined by genetics. Indeed, research by psychologist Sonja Lyubomirsky and colleagues indicates that roughly half of people's "baseline level of well-being," the propensity toward cheerfulness or negativity, owes to DNA. However, students can learn to exert control over other significant influences on their emotional outlook and, in doing so, sharpen their focus on positive outcomes.

Over the past twenty years, Marcus Conyers and I have taught many educators globally a toolbox of creative and original implementation strategies to increase practical optimism and other keys to learning in the classroom. It has become clear in studies of impact, that the research and strategies we teach have not only supported teachers to guide students to become more optimistic, but has also been helpful to educators who seek to become ever more optimistic too. We are delighted with this finding because learners with a positive viewpoint, both young and old, have less stress, better creative problem-solving skills, and better health outcomes than less optimistic people.

## Why Is Practical Optimism Critically Important?

Research now supports what I observed early in my career as a former teacher and psychologist. We now know that as students become more optimistic, they are motivated to progress through learning difficulties and to attain higher levels of achievement. More optimistic students also have greater resistance to depression and the negative effects of stress. Furthermore, studies suggest that happy people are more likely to have positive relationships with family, friends, and colleagues; to perform better on the job; and even to enjoy greater physical health than those with negative outlooks.

At BrainSMART®, we have found that emphasizing positive emotions helps students become more resilient and more likely to begin and persevere with learning tasks. Their persistence is fueled by the belief that they will triumph over difficulty, learn from their mistakes, overcome plateaus in their performance, and progress. The mantra "I think I can! I think I can!" from an all-time favorite story, *The Little Engine That Could*, illustrates practical optimistic thinking.

## BrainSMART® Original Strategies

*from Dr. Donna Wilson's Workshop*

# Creating Practically Optimistic Classrooms

- ◆ **Assist students to realize that negative events are not personal, not pervasive, and are not permanent** with the acquisition of appropriate strategies and effort to succeed.
- ◆ **Apply our BrainSMART® 2-minute strategy for helping students to rewire for optimism.**
- ◆ **Use the Arm Test experiment and I Feel Good, Yes!** to help students understand the power of positivity.
- ◆ **Teach youth to use the “Pos Tops” strategy** to steer their own thinking and to persuade others in a positive direction. Pos Tops can be especially helpful when conversations often tend to be negative in nature.
- ◆ **Model optimistic teaching.**
- ◆ **Rewire with RADAR:**
  - Recognize negative thinking.
  - Access the accuracy of those thoughts.
  - Dispute negative thoughts.
  - Alternatives for what else could be true.
  - Rehearse new thinking.
- ◆ **Assist students to internalize their learning successes.** As with most other BrainSMART strategies, this strategy is best used often so that it becomes a well-used aspect of classroom life.
- ◆ **Assist students to learn to show empathy by being kind toward others.**
- ◆ **Assist students to express gratitude often.**
- ◆ **Teach students to be “Treasure Hunters”** rather than “Trash Collectors” at school and in life.



### STRATEGY Arm Test Tool

**Overview:** Students work in pairs taking turns to do both scenarios. Ask partners to one at a time put their arm right arm out while the other person pushes down. Most people recognize the difference in energy when happy and miserable.

**Scenario 1:** In partners ask students to stand the way a miserable, isolated person would stand (e.g. shoulders slouched, eyes down, shallow breathing).

**Scenario 2:** Ask them to stand like a happy person feeling socially connected, safe, and happy would stand (e.g. head up, smile on face).

A version of the Arm Test tool is in Dr. Wilson's book, *Introduction to BrainSMART® Teaching* (page 235).



### Empathy

Empathy is an important aspect of the optimistic classroom environment. Empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of another person and has the capacity to transform individual lives for the better while helping to bring about positive social change in classrooms and communities across the world. There are currently two common approaches to empathy: shared emotional response and perspective taking.

Shared emotional response, or affective empathy, occurs when an individual shares another person's emotions. An example from our own lives came when a group of friends joined Dr. Wilson's co-author, Marcus Conyers, as he crossed the finish line of a half-marathon—they threw their arms up just as he did, mimicking his stance. Individuals in an audience involuntarily mirroring a speaker's smile is another example of this type of empathy.



## STRATEGY High-Five

*Featuring Our Treasure Hunters and Trash Collectors Story*

**Purpose:** To help students to develop the habit of consistently focusing on what's useful and positive in their lives.

**Step 1** Ask students if they would like to learn a way to more consistently sustain positive learning states.

**Step 2** Read aloud this story about Treasure Hunters and Trash Collectors.

### Treasure Hunters and Trash Collectors

*It seems that in life there are two types of people. The first are treasure hunters. Every day they seek out what is useful and positive and focus on it, talk about it, think about it and treasure it. Each of these moments is treasured like a bright, shining jewel that they store in their treasure chest forever.*

*And then there are trash collectors who spend their lives looking for what is wrong, unfair, what isn't working, and they focus their energy, time and thoughts on the trash. Every day they put that trash into a big old trash can.*

*Every day the treasure hunters proudly carry their treasure into the future, while every day the trash collectors drag their big, heavy, smelly trash can from one day to the next. The question is, when they get to the end of the year, what does each person have—a treasure chest full of useful, positive memories or a trash can full of things they didn't like?*

*The choice is yours.*

*You get to decide.*

**Step 3** Ask your students if they would like a simple way to become more of a treasure hunter.

**Step 4** Ask students to think of five things that they could feel good about, five things in their life that they like. Note: Make it very simple for them to think of five good things. Then when they have completed the five things, go to the next step.

**Step 5** Ask your students to draw a mind map or write or draw what their five things are.

**Step 6** Then get students to go to five other people, give them a high-five, and read to them what their high-five things are.

**Step 7** Continue to use this process once a week or once a month and encourage students to find more and new things to put into their high-five list.

**Note:** This simple technique is a wonderful way to get students to begin to focus on what's useful and positive. The power of this tool comes when teachers model it on a monthly, weekly, or even daily basis.

The High-Five strategy is in Dr. Wilson's book, *Introduction to BrainSMART® Teaching* (page 243).



## LESSON

### Brightside, the Optimistic Puppy

This read-aloud story, appropriate for preK and kindergarten-age children, illustrates the message that when you are optimistic about your ability to learn and succeed, you are most likely to do so. Before sharing this story, introduce the key terms optimism and succeed.

#### Brightside is a happy puppy.

*When it rains, the other puppies are sad. But Brightside says, "I love puddles!"*

*When it is time to go inside after playtime, the other puppies are sad. But Brightside says, "I love cuddling up next to the fire!"*

*When it is bath time, the other puppies are sad. But Brightside says, "I love bubbles!"*

*His mama calls him "my little optimist." Brightside doesn't know what that means, but it makes him happy just to hear her say it!*

*Brightside has many favorite things. His most favorite thing is playing with his boy Jack. The puppy loves to go for walks with Jack and learn new things. He learns how to shake his paw. He learns how to bark when Jack gives him a signal. He learns how to balance a treat on his nose. Brightside doesn't always learn new things on the first try, but he knows that if he keeps trying, he will succeed.*

*One day, Jack decides to teach Brightside how to catch a ball. "Oh, boy!" Brightside thinks. "A new favorite thing!"*

*Jack throws the ball. Brightside runs fast and far. He runs so fast and so far the ball falls behind him. "Great!" Brightside thinks. "Now I know not to run so fast and so far."*

*Jack throws the ball again. This time Brightside runs slower and not so far. The ball sails over his head. "Great!" Brightside thinks. "Now I know not to run too fast or too slow. If I watch the ball carefully, this time I'll catch it."*

*Jack throws the ball one more time. Brightside watches the ball fly through the sky, and he runs toward it at just the right speed. Then he jumps up and catches it!*

*"Yay!" Jack calls. "I knew you could do it!"*

*"Yay!" Brightside barks. "I knew I could do it, too! All I had to do was keep learning and trying! I love catching balls!"*

**Activity:** Invite children to share something important they have recently learned how to do. Did they make mistakes trying before they learned how to complete the task successfully? Consider modeling by telling students what you have recently learned.

An adaptation of this story and lesson is in Dr. Wilson's book, *Teaching Students to Drive Their Brains* (page 47).



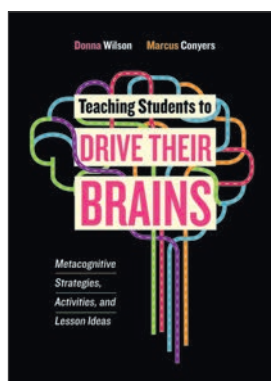




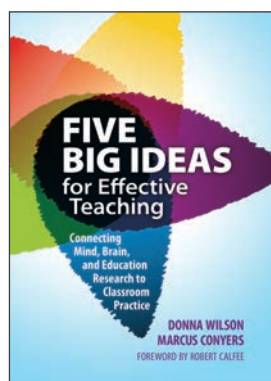


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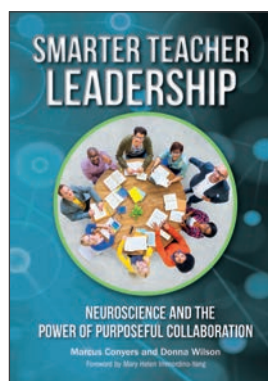
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	117002	Teaching Students to Drive Their Brains: Metacognitive Strategies, Activities, and Lesson Ideas	\$32.95
	TCP0676	Five Big Ideas for Effective Teaching: Connecting Mind, Brain and Education Research to Classroom Practice	\$32.95
	TCP4179	Smarter Teacher Leadership: Neuroscience and the Power of Purposeful Collaboration	\$35.95
	HB6623	Introduction to BrainSMART Teaching: Science, Structures and Strategies for Increasing Student Learning	\$49.95
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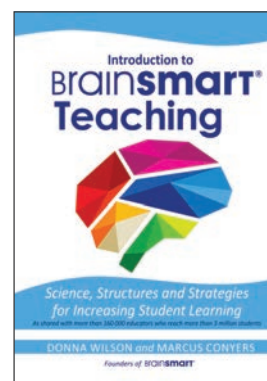
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