

# Positive Magic for Children

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## Abstract

Previous research has examined how both watching, and learning to perform, magic tricks can boost wellbeing. This paper outlines a new project that builds on this work by exploring the possibility of incorporating positive psychology into the tricks performed by professional children's entertainers. Unlike many educational interventions, this work does not involve explicit messaging, but rather encourages performers to display desirable characteristics and behaviors. This approach is illustrated with presentations that have been specially designed to boost children's levels of perseverance, to encourage them to treat mistakes as learning opportunities and to increase emotional self-regulation. The benefits of this innovative approach are considered, including the potential to reach large numbers of children, and to deliver positive messages within a fun, magical and enjoyable context.

**Keywords:** Intervention, education, magic, psychology, children, learning

## Abstrait

*Des recherches antérieures ont examiné comment regarder et apprendre à jouer, les tours de magie peuvent améliorer le bien-être. Cet article présente un nouveau projet qui s'appuie sur ce travail en explorant la possibilité d'incorporer la psychologie positive dans les tours exécutés par des animateurs professionnels pour enfants. Contrairement à de nombreuses interventions éducatives, ce travail n'implique pas de message explicite, mais encourage plutôt les interprètes à afficher les caractéristiques et les comportements souhaitables. Cette approche est illustrée par des présentations spécialement conçues pour augmenter le niveau de persévérance des enfants, pour les encourager à traiter les erreurs comme des opportunités d'apprentissage et pour accroître l'autorégulation émotionnelle. Les avantages de cette approche innovante sont pris en compte, y compris le potentiel d'atteindre un grand nombre d'enfants et de délivrer des messages positifs dans un contexte amusant, magique et agréable.*

**Mots clés:** intervention, éducation, magie, psychologie, enfants, apprentissage

A considerable amount of research has supported the importance of using positive psychology to help shape children's thinking, emotional wellbeing and behavior (e.g., Seligman et al., 2009; Shoshani & Slone, 2017). This work has been conducted within a variety of settings, including schools (for a review, see Shankland & Rosset, 2017), summer camps (Schainman, 2017) and refugee groups (Foka et al., 2020). We have recently started to explore how positive psychology

can be incorporated into an unusual but potentially highly effective context, namely, children's magic shows.

Researchers have long been interested in the relationship between psychology and magic (e.g., Binet, 1894; Triplett, 1900; Lamont & Wiseman, 2005; Kuhn, 2019). One significant strand of this work suggests that learning how to perform magic tricks results in several physical and psychological benefits, including increased self-confidence, enhanced motor skills and

improved social skills (for reviews, see Wiseman & Watt, 2018; Baginski & Kuhn, 2018). Although much of the research has been carried out within a clinical context, some of the work has focused on principles related to positive psychology within non-clinical populations. For instance, in South Africa, 'The College of Magic' aims help children to develop a range of key life skills, including honesty, empathy and humility. In America, the 'Discover Magic' initiative teaches children magic tricks that are designed to develop various positive traits, including self-confidence, preparedness and resilience (Johnston, 2016). Finally, in the UK, researchers at Goldsmith's University have explored the impact of learning magic tricks on students' mood (Baginski, 2016), and the training organisation 'Abracademy' runs workshops for corporations, schools and individuals.

Using conjuring as an educational tool may be especially effective as magic tricks often elicit several emotions that have been shown to be central to learning, including curiosity, surprise and positive affect (see Vogl et al., 2019; 2019).

We wondered whether it was possible to build on previous research in this area by incorporating positive psychology into tricks presented by children's magicians. Magicians often perform tricks that have an explicit educational message (for a review, see Wiseman & Watt, 2020). For instance, to emphasize how to cross a road safely, a performer might show a model of a traffic light, and then illustrate the order of the lights by making each of them magically turn on and off. However, the idea of incorporating positive psychology into children's magic creates an opportunity to employ an alternative, and possibly more effective, form of messaging. Research shows that children frequently imitate the behavior of those around them, and that this approach is especially effective when the children encounter role models that they like and respect (for reviews, see Bandura, 1977; Fryling, Johnston, & Hayes, 2011). We decided to utilise this idea to create presentations in which the performer exhibits the desired qualities in the hope that the children would then implicitly acquire these attributes.

The first author is a psychologist and the second author is a highly experienced children's magician. Together, we created three 'proof of concept' presentations. One of these utilized a trick frequently performed by children's entertainers known as 'The Magic Coloring Book.' During this trick, the performer flicks through a large coloring book and shows that the pages are all blank. Next, several black and white drawings magically appear in the book, and these drawings then transform into full

color images. Our three-part positive psychology presentation encourages children to tackle difficult challenges and to persevere in the face of adversity. At the start of the presentation, the performer explains that they have struggled to make any drawings magically appear in the book. The performer then encourages the children to try this difficult task by pretending that they have a magic black crayon and scribbling in the air. Unfortunately, the pages of the coloring book remain blank, and the performer encourages the children to keep trying by working together and making the imaginary drawings in a more considered way. The performer then shows that trying hard has been successful, and that lots of black and white drawings have magically appeared in the book. Next, the performer asks the children if they would like to try something even harder. The children are encouraged to carefully rub their fingers on their clothes and then throwing the colors towards the book. Finally, the performer shows that the book is now full of colorful drawings.

On the surface, the children have a fun and magical experience. However, implicit and embodied messages about the importance of perseverance are threaded throughout the presentation. In another presentation based on positive psychology, the children try to magically change several pieces of brightly colored rope into a necklace, frequently make mistakes, and are encouraged to treat these mistakes as opportunities to learn. In the third presentation, the children help the magician to link two solid metal rings together and, in doing so, discover the importance of emotional regulation and learn evidence-based techniques for dealing with sadness and anger.

Successful children's entertainers perform hundreds of shows each year, and so this new platform for positive psychology has the potential to reach a very large number of children. Finally, children's entertainers constitute a very well organized and connected community with their own extensive social networks, literature and conventions. As a result, it's straightforward to inform them about this work, to have them develop their own presentations based on positive psychology, and to encourage them to feedback their experiences to the community. It is hoped that any work flowing from this initiative would then be evaluated to assess the impact on children's emotional and cognitive wellbeing. To this end, our three initial presentations will soon be published in the best-known magic magazine, and be read by thousands of children's entertainers across the globe.

In short, we have started to develop a new form of positive psychology intervention. Unlike much of the existing work

in the area, this does not involve delivering these ideas within an educational context, but rather incorporating them into presentations that can be performed by children's magicians. This approach has the potential to reach large numbers of children in a highly entertaining context, and we welcome the interest of potential collaborators as we move forward with this innovative and exciting initiative. ■

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