

Filling Your Child's Emotional Bucket

In the past few years a series of children's books have been published teaching youngsters about "filling your invisible bucket." The books are based on a simple concept that each of us carries around an invisible bucket. These buckets are constantly emptied or filled, depending on what others say or do to us. Every time someone is treated with kindness and respect it results in a good feeling that puts a drop in the bucket. When our bucket is full, we feel great. When it's empty, we feel awful. This matters because we all know that when we feel awful we do not function as our best selves.

In addition to an invisible bucket, we each have a "dipper." We use that dipper to take from or add to other people's buckets. When we say or do things that create positive emotions in someone we add a drop to their bucket. When we say or do things that create negative feelings we dip from their bucket. Very important to this idea of "bucket filling," each time we use our ability to fill other people's buckets we also add to our own. But when we use that dipper to dip from someone's buckets – by saying or doing things that decrease their positive emotions – we deplete our own bucket.

This simple metaphor is relevant to parents and caregivers when we consider what we know about brain development and functioning. Research has identified parts of the brain known as the "pleasure center." When activated, this group of brain cells emits chemicals that give us a feeling of pleasure, reinforcing the desire to repeat that behavior. The "reward circuitry" is activated in predictable ways, from eating sweets to laughter to certain types of drug use. Researchers believe this is how behaviors necessary for survival (such as reproduction and eating) are learned. Interestingly, the reward center doesn't kick in only when we eat something delicious or observe something funny. Generosity or kindness toward others will also activate that brain circuitry. MRI studies show that when we perform an act of kindness, the brain's reward center is triggered and we experience feelings of pleasure.

Additionally, new research shows that our brains are hard wired to require a certain amount of pleasure or reward every day. If we don't get enough from our daily activities we end up with a "reward deficiency" that leads either to depression and anxiety or risky pleasure-seeking behaviors (such as drugs, alcohol, or over-eating). The take-away for caregivers is this: Each day your child needs to have their "reward pathways" activated if they are to function well emotionally, mentally and physically. You can help them with that in two ways. First, make an effort to add to their "invisible bucket" through small but frequent positive interactions (research has shown the magic ratio is five positive for every one negative interaction). Second, help them learn that filling other people's buckets will actually add to their own. Help them build the brain circuitry that will ultimately shape them into people whose greatest pleasure comes from being kind to others. The truth is, in the process you will fill your own bucket at the same time.