

7 Cognitive Biases That Parents Need to Know About

 psychologytoday.com/us/blog/parenting-neuroscience-perspective/202107/7-cognitive-biases-parents-need-know-about



Key points

- Our brains rely on rules of thumb, or heuristics, to make decision-making simpler.
- The cognitive biases that result from heuristic-based thinking often lead us to make faulty decisions.
- The first step to overcoming our biases is to be aware of them.

A cognitive bias is a systematic error in thinking that can cause us to make faulty decisions. As much as we would like to believe our decisions to be logical and rational, it is often not the case. There is only so much information that our brains can process, causing us to rely on rules of thumb, or heuristics, to make decision-making simpler in day-to-day life.

While heuristic-based thinking might be a useful technique to simplify day-to-day information processing, the cognitive biases that result from it cause us to make suboptimal decisions. The psychology of judgment and decision making has been a much-explored topic ever since Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky worked together on this in the 1970s.

Seven common cognitive biases

Cognitive biases affect all areas of our lives, but I wanted to explore how some of these biases affect parenting in particular and suggest some ways that we can try and overcome them. The first step to overcoming our biases, after all, is to be aware of them. Also, studies have shown that children end up having similar biases to those of their parents. Overcoming our biases, then, has the potential to not only make us more self-aware people but better parents as well.

1. Self-serving bias

This is the cognitive bias that comes into play when we take complete credit for our successes while blaming our failures on a situation or destiny.

Example: “You would have won the tournament if it hadn’t been for John’s immense luck!”

What to do about it: When your child fails at something, teach them to take some responsibility for their failure, learn from the experience, and move on. On the other hand, if your child scored higher marks than their friend at school, don’t simply praise your child’s intelligence or tell them that their friend is a lazy student. Make them see that other factors could have come into play.

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2. Halo effect

Very often, our positive impressions about a person influence what we think regarding aspects of their character that we don’t know much about.

Example: “My child could never do such a thing—she is an amazing being!”

What to do about it: Humans are complex creatures, and children are evolving beings. Not everything or everybody needs to be labeled as good or bad, evil or virtuous.

3. Curse of knowledge

If we are an expert at a topic, we automatically assume that the people we are communicating with will have the background to understand what we are speaking about.

Example: “I tried to tell my sixth-grade students about the mirror neuron theory, but they didn’t even get what I was talking about!”

What to do about it: As parents, it can be frustrating when our kids keep asking us questions to which the answers are obvious to us. Understanding our kids’ perspectives can happen at a deep level only when we realize that they don’t have emotional or “intelligence processes” that are as advanced as ours. I’ll have to remind myself of this the next time my toddler asks the question “Why?” for the thousandth time in an hour!

4. Confirmation bias

We tend to seek out information that reinforces our beliefs about a topic.

Example: “I believe that masks are harmful, so I joined an anti-masking group on Facebook, which shares information that reinforces what I believe about them.”

What to do about it: Teach your children from an early age to be curious and gather information on a topic in as unbiased a manner as possible. Given that kids today are growing up in an age where information (and misinformation!) is at their fingertips, this skill becomes even more important.

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5. Suggestibility

Suggestibility describes how easily someone believes without question the suggestions (often indirect ones) that people make.

Example: “Didn’t you get that bruise because Sandy hit you the other day?”

What to do about it: Given that children are known to be far more suggestible than adults are, parents owe children communication that is devoid of suggestion, as far as possible. Children often give the answer they think their parents would like to hear. Rather than ask a question that suggests an answer, like the one in the example, you could instead ask an open-ended question like, “How did you get that bruise on your arm?”

6. Stereotyping

This involves assuming something about a person from an outgroup based on our beliefs about the group as a whole, without having enough information about the individual themselves.

Example: “Oh. John is from a different culture. That explains why he’s such a bad driver.”

What to do about it: The best way to teach our children not to stereotype people is to watch what we say about outgroups ourselves. Kids are always learning from the kind of things that parents say. Making a conscious decision not to paint all people from a particular group with the same brush can go a long way.

7. Just-world hypothesis

This fallacy has people believing that actions have a fair consequence. This hypothesis can lead to several problematic assumptions, including believing that people deserve the bad things that happen to them due to past actions.

Example: “I cannot believe that Sara had such a terrible accident. She’s such a good person!”

What to do about it: Knowing for ourselves that the world is hardly just is a good place to start. When you see a homeless person, rather than wondering out loud what they might have done to deserve their fate, encourage your children to engage with them with compassion for circumstances that might have been beyond their control.

Being aware of our biases is only the first step. It takes consistent practice and constant self-awareness to start catching ourselves mid-bias, but the results can be rewarding, both for ourselves and our children.