



The power of optimistic thinking

by Michael Grose

“ . . . children learn their optimism from their experiences of success and through their interactions with parents, teachers and significant others in the first eight years of life. ”

Optimists do better academically, socially and enjoy better health than pessimists.

Helping your child look on the bright side is a significant life skill to develop. When children think that can succeed they are more likely to give things a try. In other words, if they think **THEY CAN, THEY WILL.**

Optimists look at the flip side of negative events for some good, some hope and some reason to be positive. It means having a strong self-belief and confidence to deal with situations.

There are five building blocks to optimism:

1. Trying and persisting
2. Practising and getting better
3. Having a positive view of failure
4. Planning and organisational skills
5. Having the confidence to try again

Importantly, these building blocks link optimism with competence so when children experience success they are more likely to believe that they can achieve and have more success.

Some children are natural optimists. They are born with optimistic temperaments and have natural dispositions to deal with challenges and problems. Others expect the worst and tend to see catastrophes where really small challenges exist.

Recent research indicates that children learn their optimism from their experiences of success and through their interactions with parents, teachers and significant others in the first eight years of life.

So the way adults talk is significant in the way they shape a child's belief about success or failure. The message is clear that adults need to be aware about how they present the world to children as our explanatory style (the way we explain events) is on show.

Optimists tend to do the following:

- Look for positives and stay hopeful
- Believe negative events are temporary
- Don't let one negative event spoil everything
- Take realistic credit for good things that happen

Pessimists have a tendency to build mountains out of molehills and give up before trying. The trouble with pessimism is that it tends to be a self-fulfilling prophecy. "I told you I wouldn't get a kick in the game. What was the point of me even turning up?" Such comments just reinforce pessimism and these feelings of hopelessness lead to helplessness.

Children who use a balanced approach the cause of negative events take into account the behaviour of others or adverse circumstances. They like themselves better and are less likely to feel disempowered by an event. When things go well their self-esteem increased. They pat themselves on the back and acknowledge their part in the events. They feel empowered because their efforts made a difference.

A note of caution: Being overly optimistic can be counter-productive if it is too unrealistic. With some children constant striving for a goal without the resources or ability to achieve the goal can lead to giving

up and then to hopelessness. Research by Harvard psychologist David McClelland found that people who achieve the most success show both optimism and pessimism when selecting goals. They anticipate difficulties before they occur and then plan to avoid or overcome them.

To promote optimism in children try the following four strategies:

1. **Model** positive thinking and optimism. Let children hear your positive self-talk.
2. **Challenge** children's negative or unrealistic appraisals. For instance, "Everyone hates me. I have no friends" can be challenged with "Sometimes it feels like we have no friends but you spent all morning with Melanie yesterday."
3. Teach children to **positively track**. Children should look for the good things they do and say them to themselves or out loud. They can look for the good things that happen in life, no matter how small and say them to themselves or out loud.
4. Teach children to **positively reframe**. When something unpleasant happens or failure occurs they can look on the bright side. E.g. "I pranged my bike but at least I wasn't hurt."

You can find out more about optimism in Michael Grose's **Confidence Program: Creative ways to boost confidence in kids** available at: www.parentingideas.com.au