

# Optimism

Thriving Series by MICHAEL GROSE



  
Parenting *ideas*  
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**10 essential optimism skills**  
to teach your kids so they can achieve

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## First a few thoughts

**Optimism is not about the glass being half full as is commonly believed. Optimism refers to your belief system about how successful you think your actions are, and how effectively you can impact on the world.**

Optimists do better academically, socially and have better health than pessimists so it makes sense to promote the skills of optimistic thinking to children. Optimists look at the flip side of negative events for some good, some hope and some reason to be positive. The basis for optimism is in the way that a person thinks about the causes of events, which is reflected in the way he or she explains events.

Recent American research indicates that children learn optimism or pessimism from their experiences of success and through their interactions with parents, teachers and other significant adults. Parents and teachers model optimism and pessimism for children.

Adults model an optimistic or pessimistic attitude by the way they react to both adverse and positive events that happen in their lives.

### **Optimistic children may explain adverse events in the following ways:**

- Adverse events are temporary. 'It takes time to find a friend' rather than 'No one likes me.'
- Situations or causes are specific, not global. 'I am not so good at soccer' rather than 'I am hopeless at sport.'
- Blame is rationalised rather than personalised 'I was grounded because I hit my sister' rather than 'I was grounded because I am a bad kid.'

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.

Adults can help children and young people become optimistic thinkers with the use of modeling and also by directly teaching and drawing kids' attention to the skills of optimistic thinking.

Following are 10 broad skills you can use to develop a sense of optimism in your kids.

# 10 optimism skills

## SKILL 1 Change your self-talk

### Help children understand self-talk.

Get them to listen to that little voice in their heads that says they can or can't do things. An easy way to do this is to ask kids to stand in front of a mirror and listen to the voice in their head.

Optimistic kids use different self-talk than pessimists. Confident, optimistic kids talk themselves up, and give themselves messages in line with their abilities. Pessimists use a great deal of negative self-talk and talk themselves out of doing things. Negative self-talk becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. When asked to give a talk at school a pessimistic child can think: "I'm no good at giving talks. I'll only mess it up. Kids will laugh at me." This becomes their default mechanism. Alternatively, the self-talk of an optimistic child maybe, "Giving talks is hard. But I'll do okay at it." Or "Wow! I'm great at talks. I can't wait!" Kids' self-talk will determine their attitude and also how they approach the activity.

Get kids to listen to their self-talk and help them work out alternative messages that they can use if they are self-defeating. They can repeat positive or more helpful messages before they approach a situation that causes them anxiety. Encourage kids to write out positive self-talk messages that help them think more confidently about risk-taking situations so that the messages are reinforced.

**HERE'S AN EXAMPLE:** You are going to give a talk at school in front of a large group of kids.

**Pessimistic response:** *"This is really hard and I'll probably stuff it up."*

**Optimistic response:** *"This is pretty challenging but I should do okay."*

**TEACH KIDS THAT THEY CAN CHANGE THE SELF TALK FROM A NEGATIVE TO A POSITIVE RESPONSE.**

## SKILL 2 Slow down and think through the options

**Many children jump to conclusions when negative situations occur, which means they think and act impulsively rather than check out possible causes of events.**

These automatic responses may be justified as they are in line with past events, but in reality they are the least likely explanations. For example, a boy is walking through the school yard and he's hit in the face by a football. He automatically thinks someone is aiming at him to try and hurt him. This is more likely if he has been on the receiving end of some rough treatment in the past. But if we stop and think about it the most likely scenario would be that it was merely a ball kicked out of bounds by some kids involved in a game.

Jumping to the wrong or incorrect conclusions is a problem pessimists share to their own detriment.

**HERE'S AN EXAMPLE TO TRY:** You are waiting outside a shop for your friends to arrive. None of them are there. You wait five minutes yet no one arrives.

**Pessimistic thought:** *They ditched me.*

**More likely reasons:** *They missed their bus. No one has a watch. They're held up by someone's mum.*

**TEACH KIDS TO SLOW DOWN AND THINK!**

## SKILL 3 Positively reframe

**Optimistic people are able to find positive aspects in negative situations, no matter how small.**

This encourages people to feel like they have some control over situations and is the beginning of experiencing hope.

One very practical thing parents can do is to teach their kids the skill of positive reframing. That is, develop the art of finding something positive in even the most difficult situations. Start by getting kids to notice the good in themselves and others.

Then encourage them to find something positive in a bad experience.

Here are a few positive spins that kids can find in most Hardships, Frustrations and Difficulties:

- ✓ **Learning something to prevent it happening next time:**  
*"You may have been unsuccessful this time but you know what to do next time."*
- ✓ **Positive spin-off:**  
*"It may have been a boring party but you did meet a new friend, which is great."*
- ✓ **Learning about yourself:**  
*"Maybe football, rather than cricket, is more your bag."*
- ✓ **It's just this! Avoidance of something more unpleasant:**  
*"You may have wrecked your skateboard but at least you didn't get hurt and end up in hospital."*

**TEACH KIDS TO CHANGE THE FRAME!**

## SKILL 4 Look for the lesson

**Self-blame is strongly-related with pessimistic thinking.**

When something goes wrong or mistakes occur pessimists automatically search for someone to blame, and often they blame squarely at their own feet, whether it's justified or not.

An effective way to move thinking away from laying blame is to encourage kids to look for the lesson in a situation rather than look for blame.

When mistakes are made or situations don't quite go to plan encourage kids to ask themselves:

- ✓ **What can you learn about yourself for next time?**  
e.g. A child may learn when he goes on a school camp he was dreading that he can spend time away from home and still survive.
- ✓ **What can you learn to avoid or turn this situation around?**  
e.g. A child may learn that he can reduce conflict with less than pleasant peers by ignoring nasty comments and actively spending more time with friendly kids.

**TEACH KIDS TO LOOK FOR THE LEARNING IN EVERY SITUATION**

## SKILL 5 Apportion blame fairly

### Bad things happen to kids.

They miss getting invited to every birthday party. They don't do as well as they would like in tests. They get cut from teams. The ability to blame fairly and accurately is a fabulous life skill as bad things will continue to happen throughout life. Your kids will miss out on jobs. They will experience rejection in relationships. They will probably experience retrenchment from work. If they learn to apportion blame fairly they will more than likely find their way out.

The overriding principle is for kids to blame accurately, based on fact. That means they look for the real reason for a negative event, and apportion blame accordingly. Most things, whether good or bad happen due to a mixture of luck, other people and your own actions. Apportioning blame fairly is about getting the mix right between those three areas.

**HERE'S AN EXAMPLE:** A player who misses a shot at goal in the last minute of the game who apportions blame fairly would think in this way. There was some bad luck as it just happened to be the last shot of the day, and there were plenty of other missed shots too. If others had played better perhaps we would have been in front and there would be no need to have a winning shot. I should take some responsibility as the shot could have been more accurate although I did try my best.

**TEACH KIDS TO BLAME ACCURATELY BASED ON FACTS, RATHER THAN EMOTION.**

## SKILL 6 Practise perspective-taking

### Kids often get things out of proportion when they are under stress.

They jump to the worst possible conclusion when things go wrong. The propensity to catastrophise exaggerates anxiety. Be mindful of your child's need to jump to the worst from time to time. A bit of reassurance is all that's needed in these one-off scenarios.

But if you, like your child, are a serial catastrophiser, then it will be useful to challenge your unhelpful or extreme thinking when it happens. Not only will you model realistic thinking for your kids, but you will get an insight into what you need to do to change your child's catastrophising.

Under fives generally don't overtly catastrophise, however even young children can be negative. Make sure you model upbeat, positive thinking as young children take their cues from their parents, particularly the parent they spend most time around.

School-aged children need to be encouraged to keep things in perspective. Challenge your child's propensity to catastrophise. Here are three ways you can use to challenge your child's catastrophic thinking:

1. "What's the most likely scenario?" Sometimes it's useful to introduce a dose of old-fashioned rational thinking. "Yep, you could break your leg if you go skiing. But the odds are that you won't."
2. "Does it really matter?" "You may be right, but is it the end of the world as we know it?"

One way of dealing with hard core catastrophisers is to admit that they could be right, but even if they are right and the worst case scenario does happen, the sun will still shine tomorrow. Take kids to the worst possible scenario and they may see it's not so bad.

3. "That's unhelpful thinking." Sometimes kids' thinking is so out of whack with reality that they become anxious about minor things. Thinking such as, 'everyone must like me', 'I must never make a mistake' and 'bad things always happen to me' are extreme and need to be replaced by more moderate, realistic thoughts. E.g. "It would be nice if everyone liked me but not everyone will. It's important to have some good friends."

**TEACH KIDS TO JUMP TO THE LIKELY CONCLUSION, NOT THE WORST CASE SCENARIO.**

## SKILL 7 Wind back your language

**Today's kids talk in extremes – 'awesome', 'the best' and 'gross' roll off their tongues easily these days.**

Extreme language leads to extreme thinking. So encourage kids to replace "I'm furious" with "I'm annoyed", "It's a disaster" with "It's a pain", "I hate it" with "I don't like it". Sounds minor but by changing kids' language you change how they think about events and, more importantly, how they feel.

One way of turning down internal stress as well as inflexible thinking is to tone down your language – replace 'I can't stand this!' with 'I don't like it.' Next time you feel annoyed about a situation and your response is out of all proportion to the event, tone down your language and you'll instantly start to feel better and more in control. This is a great coping skill, I can assure you.

This holds true for children and young people. When they ramp up a situation with over-the-top language let them know that they can turn the catastrophe switch down a few notches. Something bad that happens to them may just be a 'pain in the neck' rather than 'the worst thing ever.' 'Disappointing' rather than 'devastating.'

**TEACH KIDS TO TURN DOWN THE CATASTROPHE SWITCH A FEW NOTCHES**

## SKILL 8 Set realistic goals

**Before kids figure out how to solve a problem, they need to figure out what the ultimate goal maybe.**

Then they should think of, or list the steps or actions they need to do to reach their goal. If they had a fight with a friend, then their goal would probably be to stay friends. To reach this goal they would probably have to apologise, do something special to make up for the dispute and change the behaviour that led to the dispute.

Once a child sets a goal they need to think of as many ways to reach the goal as possible. Many kids get locked into one path, only to get stuck when they reach a dead end. Goal-setting is a potent skill as it involves movement and invokes action rather than stagnation or inaction, which is the result of pessimistic, hopeless thinking.

Goal-setting is essential if your child is to be a resilient learner. Teach them to set realistic learning goals on a regular basis. Effective learning goals are achievable, measurable and specific. Learning 3 spelling words each day is an effective goal as it is achievable, measurable and specific rather than vague ('I want to be a better speller').

**TEACH KIDS TO SET REALISTIC GOALS AND MAKE STEPS TO ACHIEVE THEM**

## SKILL 9 Use the disaster meter

**Catastrophisers get themselves in a knot about relatively insignificant things.**

Okay, making a fool out of themselves may not be insignificant to kids, however compared to plenty of other events... well, perspective is a good thing. Help them get some perspective by giving their worry a score out of ten, on how important the issue really is.

Establish with children benchmarks for each number from 1 to 10 on a disaster meter. Draw on children's past experiences. For instance, a score of 1 out of 10 may be losing your sock. A score of 10 out of 10 may be linked to when 'grandma died'. Use the benchmarks as a reality check when children over react to negative or bad events.

**ASK KIDS TO ASSESS NEGATIVE EVENTS ON THEIR PERSONAL DISASTER METERS.**

## SKILL 10: Count your blessings daily

Many children automatically expect bad things to happen.

They sabotage their efforts with their negative thinking, because their thinking defaults to pessimism. And like a self-fulfilling prophecy their efforts match their expectations and they don't achieve, succeed, or overcome difficulties.

One way to change the default mechanism from pessimistic to optimistic is to encourage kids to look for and count their blessings on a daily basis. One way of doing this is to provide an exercise book where they record at least three good things or happy events that happened to them during the day. Encourage them to think hard – good things will be there – they just have to look. This activity trains their default thinking mechanism to look for positives rather than always being on the lookout for the negative or worst aspects of any event.

**ENCOURAGE KIDS TO LOOK FOR THE GOOD THINGS THAT HAPPEN TO THEM.**

# How optimistic are your kids?

Choose a child (or yourself) and complete this Optimism Quiz.

### DOES HE OR SHE USUALLY:

- |    |   |         |        |
|----|---|---------|--------|
| 1. | Take blame personally when things go wrong?   | YES [0] | NO [2] |
| 2. | Blow negative events out of proportion?   | YES [0] | NO [2] |
| 3. | Take personal credit if things go well such as doing well in a test at school or winning a game.          | YES [2] | NO [0] |
| 4. | Believe that with hard work or better skills he or she can improve.                                       | YES [2] | NO [0] |
| 5. | Usually looks on the bright side of any situation.  | YES [2] | NO [0] |
| 6. | Catastrophise things that go wrong at school or think bad events are force 10 large scale mega disasters. | YES [0] | NO [2] |
| 7. | Immediately jumps to the worst possible outcome if he or she is unsure of something.                      | YES [0] | NO [2] |
| 8. | Takes plenty of learning risks and is not held back by the possibility of failure.                        | YES [2] | NO [0] |

**SCORE:** This child is:

**14 -16.** A raving optimist

**10-12.** A cautious optimist

**6-8.** A hard-working optimist (i.e has to work hard at it)

**0-4 .** A struggling optimist



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