



THE PARENTING CENTER

School District of
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PRESS

The Parenting Center

The Parenting Center is proud to sponsor speaker presentations, workshops and support groups throughout the school year. Call the center for upcoming events. 973-762-5600 ext. 1850

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The Optimistic Child

The optimistic child feels better about herself because she knows **how** to make things better.

According to Martin Seligman, Ph.d, author of **The Optimistic Child**, by teaching our children the skills of optimism we can immunize them against depression and help them build lifelong resilience

Why optimism? Seligman argues that pessimistic people get depressed more often than optimistic people. He also points out that pessimists do worse at school and on the job, because they fail to use their talents to the fullest. And a pessimist's health is usually worse than an optimist's.

The optimist understands that her thoughts directly affect her mood and her behavior. She is able to change her unrealistic pessimistic thoughts into more realistic optimistic thoughts. She persists to turn failures into success.

Seligman is careful to point out that by teaching our children to become optimists, we are **not** simply boosting self esteem, or promoting "empty" positive thinking. Rather, we are teaching our children to seek the accurate causes of a problem, to overcome helplessness, and to master adversity.

The ABC's of Optimism

In Martin Seligman's book, **The Optimistic Child**, he outlines the following **ABC's** of optimism:

Adversity is any unpleasant experience. For a child it might be falling off a bike, fighting with a friend, making a mistake on a homework assignment, etc.

Belief is what a person tells herself about the adversity. For example, a child who falls off a bike might say: "*I'm such a klutz! I can't do anything right! I'll never learn how to ride a bike.*"

Consequence is how a person feels and behaves *as a result of her belief*. The child who believes she is a klutz is likely to feel depressed and frustrated. She might not ride her bike again for a long time. She might not learn to play a sport with skill and confidence **because** of her belief that she can't do it.

Following are the techniques to use with the ABC's. See the next page for more details.

Thought Catching: Teach your child to catch her automatic negative thoughts. Ask your child to notice how the thoughts make her feel and behave.

Evaluating Thoughts: Ask your child to evaluate or dispute her thoughts for accuracy. Point out evidence that contradicts your child's belief that she "can't do anything." For example, say: "*You know how to run, you know how to climb trees, you know how to play hopscotch, etc.*"

Creating Alternative Thoughts: Help kids find different ways of thinking. For example, the child who believes she's a klutz could say instead: "*Today I fell off my bike, but yesterday I didn't fall out of the tree I climbed.*" Or: "*I'll be more careful next time!*" or "*I know how to catch a ball, so maybe I'm not such a klutz!*"

Decatastrophizing: Teach kids to focus on the most likely outcome, rather than the worst possible outcome. The child who says "*I'll never learn how to ride a bike.*" is turning a common mistake into a catastrophe. Help her see the likely outcome, so that she says instead: "*With more practice, I will learn how to ride my bike!*"

The Pie Game

Children often have a hard time understanding that there are usually several causes of a problem. This game will help your child find the accurate causes of a problem.

1. Ask your child to name the problem.
2. Ask your child to draw a large circle (pie) on a piece of paper.
3. Ask your child to name the possible causes of the problem. Each time she mentions a cause, ask her to draw a slice on the pie and to write the cause on the slice.
4. Help your child find **accurate** causes for the problem. For example, if your child finds only permanent, global causes for her problem, help her find temporary, specific causes.

How To Handle a Catastrophe

Ask the following questions to *decatastrophize* a situation.

- ◆ **What is the *worst* that could happen? What can I do to stop the worst from happening?**
- ◆ **What is the *best* that could happen? What can I do to help make the best thing happen?**
- ◆ **What is most *likely* to happen? What can I do to handle the most likely thing if it happens?**

A Few Thoughts on Thoughts

In Seligman's book, he outlines several different types of thoughts that can affect mood and behavior. Teach your child to differentiate between optimistic and pessimistic thoughts. Here's a summary.

Permanent: The pessimistic child believes that the causes of bad events are permanent. This child is at risk for depression because he feels stuck in a bad situation. **Permanent thoughts include:** "I'll never have any friends." "My mom never lets me do anything." "School stinks."

Temporary: The optimistic child has learned how to look at the causes of bad events as temporary. The optimistic child doesn't feel stuck in a bad situation. **Temporary thoughts include:** "It takes time to find a new friend." "My mom won't let me play outside today." "I had a bad day at school."

Global/Pessimistic: The pessimistic child latches onto global explanations for bad events. He tends to give up on everything after failing at one thing. **Global/Pessimistic thoughts include:** "All teachers are mean." "I stink at school."

Specific/Optimistic: The optimist is able to find specific causes for bad events. He doesn't give up on everything when he fails at one thing. **Specific/Optimistic thoughts include:** "Miss Stickler yells a lot." "I don't do very well in Math."

General Self-Blame: The pessimistic child tends to blame *only* himself when things go wrong. He thinks that there is something permanently wrong with him. Therefore, he thinks he has no power to solve the problem. **General self blame thoughts include:** "I failed the spelling test because I'm stupid." "I didn't get picked for the concert because I'm a terrible musician."

Behavioral Self-Blame: The optimistic child is able to blame a specific, temporary action as the cause for a problem. He knows he can solve the problem by changing his behavior. **Behavioral Self-Blame thoughts include:** "I failed the spelling test because I didn't study." "I didn't get picked for the concert because I didn't practice the recorder."

Twisted Thoughts:

Here are a few more types of thoughts that are common to pessimistic thinkers:

- ◆ **All or Nothing:** *Things are either right or wrong, good or bad, perfect or a total failure.* A pessimistic child who makes a small mistake while painting a picture might say: "It's totally ruined!" He then might crumple up the picture. The optimistic child will find a way to fix the mistake.
- ◆ **Labeling:** *Attaching negative labels to oneself or to others.* This is an extreme form of all-or-nothing thinking. The pessimistic child who makes a mistake might say: "I'm a loser." or "I'm a jerk." This self-labeling will leave him feeling angry, helpless and depressed. The optimistic child allows himself, and others, to make mistakes. He doesn't attach negative labels because he knows that mistakes can be corrected.
- ◆ **Magnification:** *Making a problem bigger than it really is.* The pessimistic child will exaggerate the importance of his problems and shortcomings. He will also minimize the importance of his good qualities. The child who fails a math test, for example, might say: "Now I'll never get into college." The optimistic child will be unhappy about the test, but will resolve to make it up in some way. He will also recognize the desirable qualities that will help him get into college.