

# Optimism

Parent easy guide 56



Parenting SA

One of the best things parents can give their children is a healthy attitude to living. There is a sense of satisfaction and achievement for parents who feel confident that their child is equipped to handle difficulties and challenges. We live in a world of uncertainty and change where many things are beyond our control. How we manage often depends on the way we see situations. Helping your child become an optimist and 'look on the bright side of life' is a step towards preparing your child for a strong future.

*This PEG uses 'he' and 'she' in turn.  
Change to suit your child's sex.*

## What is optimism?

Optimism is being able to expect the best out of life's experiences. It means having hope and a strong belief and confidence to deal with situations. Optimism is about thinking positively. Being able to look on the bright side helps all of us to get on top of challenges and manage life's difficulties.

## Why is optimism important?

Remember the story of the little red engine from your childhood? When faced with the challenge of climbing the hill, the little red engine said to itself over and over again 'I think I can, I think I can'. As it came nearer to the top of the hill it changed its chant to 'I know I can!'

If, like the engine, children believe they can, they are more likely to give things a go.

Psychologists who work with athletes 'to win' often help them develop images of themselves succeeding or 'self talk' to help them remain positive through hours of training. This is optimism in practice.

## What are the building blocks of optimism?

- > Having a go.
- > Practising.
- > Planning for the best outcome.
- > Coming to terms with success and failure.
- > Having the belief and confidence to try again.

## How do children develop optimism?

Some children are born with a 'sunny disposition' and a natural ability that lends itself to dealing with challenges and solving problems. Other children may struggle to overcome difficulties, often expecting the worst to occur (making 'mountains out of molehills'). As children grow and develop they need as many opportunities as possible to explore their world and experience success.

Every time children achieve something they set out to do, they start to develop a belief that they can go on trying and have more successes.

'Self talk' is what we say to ourselves to explain the things that happen through the day. When children can say to themselves that they can do something they are more likely to succeed.

The ways that adults think about and talk about their experiences are very powerful in shaping a child's beliefs about why success or failure might happen.

An optimistic parent, might say something like, 'I was just thinking to myself that most of the time when you allow enough time and really try hard with your maths homework you get good results', rather than 'See, you never allow yourself enough time and you don't try hard enough with your maths homework'.

The fit between **what you think** and **how you feel** = **how you act**.



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## Optimists

- > Optimists are people who refuse to feel helpless and don't give up when faced with seemingly impossible problems. They expect to succeed, believe in themselves and remain positive. Optimists are less likely to suffer from depression.
- > Optimists are more likely to recognise and think about their past signs of successes and what they did to succeed.
- > The more optimistic children are, the more able they are to succeed and have a sense of the future, and to make friends and learn at school.
- > Optimistic thinking has words like – maybe, sometimes, usually, possibly, perhaps.

## Pessimists

- > Pessimists are people who feel down and helpless and, to them, everything seems too big and too difficult. There is often a sense of despair and hopelessness... looking on the worst side of the situation or always finding reasons why something can't be tried or won't work.
- > A tendency to make 'mountains out of molehills' means people can think problems are impossible and they give up before even trying.
- > Pessimism gets worse with each setback and soon becomes self-fulfilling. For example 'Every time I try to throw a goal I miss anyway, so I may as well not try any more and not even go to practice. I never get picked for the team, anyway'.
- > Pessimists are more likely to give in to helplessness and are at a greater risk of developing depression.
- > Pessimistic thinking has words like – always, never, shouldn't, can't.

## What parents can do

**Be a good model** – let your children hear how you make sense of a situation (hear your 'self talk') and share your positive thoughts with your children.

**Rephrase what your child says** – say things or use different words to make more positive sense out of a situation. Child: 'I never have anyone to play with.' Parent: 'Sometimes it's hard to find a friend, but last week you had a good time with Mary.'

**Tell your own stories of overcoming hardships** – 'When I was at school I thought... but then I realised...' 'Use stories or videos to inspire – The Karate Kid, The Lion King, The Tortoise and the Hare, Free Willy.'

**Give encouragement** – 'What were the thoughts when you were losing that tennis game?', 'How did your thoughts change to help you to move from losing to winning?' Help your child catch the helpful and unhelpful thoughts and stick with the helpful ones.

**Remember and tell some of the old sayings:**  
'If at first you don't succeed – try, try again.'  
'There's no such word as can't.'  
'Every cloud has a silver lining.'

**Draw your child's attention** to media and highlight public figures or winning teams who have overcome hardship.

## Reminders

- > Teaching your child how to build an optimistic outlook costs nothing but is good life insurance
- > Every time children achieve something they start to believe that they can go on trying and have more successes.
- > The more optimistic children are, the more they are able to succeed.
- > The way that adults think about their experiences is powerful in shaping a child's beliefs about why success or failure might occur.

## Contacts

Parent Helpline: Tel 1300 364 100  
24 hours a day, 7 days a week for advice on child health and parenting

Child and Family Health Centres: Tel 1300 733 606  
9am–4:30pm, Monday to Friday to make an appointment at your local Centre

## Websites

[www.parenting.sa.gov.au](http://www.parenting.sa.gov.au)  
For other Parent Easy Guides  
[www.cyh.com](http://www.cyh.com)  
For parenting and child health information  
[www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au)  
[www.headroom.net.au](http://www.headroom.net.au)

## For more information

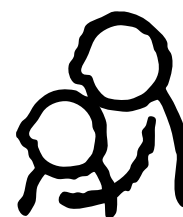
**Parent Helpline 1300 364 100**

**Parenting SA**  
**Children, Youth and Women's Health Service**  
**Telephone (08) 8303 1660**  
**Internet: [www.parenting.sa.gov.au](http://www.parenting.sa.gov.au)**

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**Parent Easy Guides are free in South Australia**

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