

香港資優教育學院
The Hong Kong Academy for Gifted Education

Factsheet

NURTURING OPTIMISTIC CHILDREN

By Matthew Chu

It is generally assumed that optimistic people are carefree and cheerful. They are thought to be positive, fearless and full of confidence. They often tell themselves: "I can do it." "I'm capable." "Nothing can get me down." However, research has shown that these views do not hold. Optimistic people also encounter obstacles and difficulties in their lives, just like everybody else. They sometimes feel sad, dejected, disappointed or heartbroken. Even if a person sees everything around him as perfect, he might not be optimistic. In fact, he could be in denial of the truth.

So what is optimism then? Martin E. Seligman, the former President of the American Psychological Association and Professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of Pennsylvania, has been conducting research on depression for over twenty years. He explained that whether a person is optimistic or not depends on the explanatory style he adopts in interpreting the difficulties he encounters.

Three modes of optimistic thinking

We give reasons for things that happen to us. This explanatory style begins to develop at an early age, and in general, this mode of thinking will persist throughout one's lifetime. According to Dr. Seligman's theory, explanatory styles can be categorised into permanence, pervasiveness and personalisation. Optimistic and pessimistic people have very different explanatory styles when responding to setbacks. Pessimistic people believe that setbacks are unavoidable and are often disastrous. They are convinced that misfortunes will ensue and turn their lives upside down. They tend to blame themselves rather than external factors or others, and feel that they should be held responsible for any setbacks they encounter. Even when they realise that they are not to blame, they still think that other contextual factors are unchangeable, and will consequently become discouraged and withdrawn.

Permanence: Permanent or Temporary?

Children who suffer from depression tend to adopt a permanent explanatory style when they are faced with setbacks. Believing that the causes of misfortunes are permanent and endless, they are likely to feel helpless. In contrast, most children who overcome setbacks believe that the causes of their misfortunes are only short-lived.

The following is a list of different reactions of optimistic and pessimistic children.

Optimistic Children	Pessimistic Children
Mom is in a bad mood today. I hope she'll be fine soon.	Mom is the most bad-tempered person in the world.
Siu Ming is mad at me today. He doesn't want to play with me.	Siu Ming dislikes me. He doesn't play with me anymore.
My younger sister is still young and innocent .I shouldn't be too bothered by her now. She will grow up	My younger sister is bugging me every day!

Children tend to be pessimistic if they see their failure and rejection by others as 'permanent'. However, if they confine their misfortunes to a certain temporary timeframe, they are being more optimistic.

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Pervasiveness: Pervasive or Individual?

Some children are capable of stopping difficulties from affecting every aspect of their lives, as though they have an effective defense mechanism which enables them to compartmentalise their problems and concerns. Even if they come across problems, they can still get on with their lives as usual. On the other hand, a pessimistic child when faced with adversity will think that a series of worse misfortunes will follow and will also affect every aspect of his life.

As John Milton famously wrote, 'The mind is its own place, and in itself, can make a Heaven of Hell, and a Hell of Heaven'.

Optimistic Children	Pessimistic Children
I failed my math test this time. If I remember the formula, I will surely pass the test next time.	The math test was easy but I failed it. I will fail again no matter how hard I study. I will surely fail other subjects including English, Chinese and History as well.
I am not very good at football.	I am not good at football and my academic results are also poor. I'm a total failure.
Siu Ming and Siu Mei are mad at me.	Nobody in my class wants to play with me.

Personalisation: Internal or External?

Personalisation is the third explanatory style. When misfortunes occur, children may blame themselves (internalised), but they may also shift their responsibilities to others or attribute their misfortunes to external factors (externalised). Children who blame themselves excessively have lower self-esteem. No matter what happens, they think that they should be held personally responsible. They are hence prone to self-blame and may suffer from depression if such thoughts persist.

To help children develop as optimists, we have to first identify the actual responsibility that children ought to take for their behaviour. They should neither blame themselves excessively nor avoid responsibilities altogether. They should adopt a 'blame on behavior' instead of 'blame on character' approach and not blame themselves for all negative outcomes.

Optimistic Children	Pessimistic Children
There are 40 pupils in my class and I am ranked 36th in the exam. I did not prepare myself well enough. Next time, I will do better if I prepare early.	There are 40 pupils in my class and I am ranked 36th in the exam. I am stupid. No matter how hard I try, it will be useless.
Today, my teacher scolded me in front of the whole class for my being inattentive. If I don't talk too much with my classmates, I will not be scolded again.	Today, my teacher scolded me in front of the whole class, telling them that I was a bad student and I wouldn't be respected.
My mother is unhappy because I lost her watch.	My mother often pulls a long face because I am not adorable.

If children are dissatisfied with their own behavior and not their character, they will try to improve as they understand that it is possible to change their behavior. On the other hand, if children attribute

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their problems to innate character, they are far more likely to become dispirited and unwilling to work towards improvement.

A realistically optimistic child

In addition to teaching our children how to identify both optimistic and pessimistic thinking, it is even more important that we help them to understand if their thinking is realistic and accurate. We want them to value their life and view matters objectively.

We hope that our children do not shirk their responsibilities and blame others when things go wrong. A truly optimistic child looks at an issue from different perspectives. He will not exacerbate or evade problems nor shift the blame to others.

Children have to learn how to objectively analyse problems. True optimism is based on accurate observation and optimistic children should analyse issues objectively.