

# Raising Optimistic



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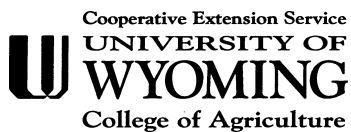
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## **Attitudes, explanations, and actions**

The challenges of growing up can make it tough for kids to keep a positive attitude. Parents may criticize excessively or siblings tease a bit much. Schools are competitive, too busy, too boring, and kids may get lost in the crowd. Peers can be pushy, petty, or pressuring at times. Neighborhoods can be strange or unfriendly.

All these demands help explain why depression is the number one mental health problem in America.

Some kids who feel discouraged, afraid, or isolated may drop out of school, escape through drugs and alcohol, or fall in with friends who take pride in bullying, crimes, or sex. Other children push themselves even harder to reach impossible standards, while showing their families smiling faces and jovial attitude. Overall, 55 percent of middle school and high school students feel little personal power or self-esteem and 30 percent are not optimistic about their futures.

*Optimism* is an attitude of hope and confidence expressed in positive risk-taking and constructive relationships. The way a person explains life's ups and downs has a powerful effect on confidence and future success. Healthy, optimistic attitudes lead to positive effort and positive results in a cycle of hope. Pessimistic or negative expectations and interpretations create a reinforcing cycle of gloom. The negative cycle may sound like this:

Child: *Goodnight, Mom.*

Mom: *Goodnight, Chris. Did you get your history project done?*

Child: *Nah...but it doesn't matter. I am not good at school projects. I'll flunk.*

Mom: *Oh, Chris, don't say that. You'll do just fine. You always do.*

Child: *Oh, Mom, you don't understand. My history teacher said my topic was 'unusual.' That means dumb. He won't like it.*

Mom: *Well, I believe in you. Why don't you get a good night's sleep?*

## **Half empty; half full**

Some people seem to see the sunshine, others the dark clouds. Pessimists often perform as well or better than optimists. They may be more likeable and cooperative, but tend to focus on the one kid or teacher who didn't like them. These negative interpretations may compromise achievement and social adjustment, even mental health.

Many parents offer encouragement to help a child feel better, but provide few oppor-





tunities to reflect on his or her abilities, accept failure and pain, or look at the bright side of relationships. The mom in the example above might have sat down with her child at the beginning to listen to his ideas, help him plan, find resources, and communicate better with his teacher. By allowing the child to take the lead on ideas and initiative, she could allow him to experience greater control. Parental encouragement at each step in the project might have included helping him recognize growth and progress, special talents, and unique viewpoints. Building confidence and positive interpretations little-by-little, her reassurance the night before the deadline would have reminded him of specific accomplishments. Instead, her “don’t worry” comments discount his fears without offering evidence for true confidence in his abilities.

Parents and teachers can help a child *think* and *talk* about events, including failures and disappointments, in more optimistic ways. Basketball players imagine the ball falling through the net before shooting, and “strikeout kings” learn to wait on a curve ball to hit the next one out of the park. In the same way, kids of all ages can learn to appreciate and build on their strengths and accept and improve on weaknesses.

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## **Don’t give up on yourself: Talking and thinking on the bright side**

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*“Your way of explaining events to yourself determines how helpless you can become, or how energized, when you encounter everyday setbacks as well as momentous defeats.”*

—Martin E.P. Seligman

Things may not go perfectly, but keeping an attitude of optimism (and being prepared) will make more things go right. When the day is over, accepting failures and celebrating successes is the only way to make tomorrow a better day than today.

Optimism and pessimism can be seen in three areas:

- Permanence: How long is triumph or trouble likely to last?
- Pervasiveness: How much does one event predict the rest of your life?
- Personalization: How much good or bad is caused by something you did (or didn’t do) or how much is “just how things are”?

Each of these areas of thinking and talking is discussed and illustrated below.

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### **Permanence**

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Optimists view troubles as temporary and success as a result of skills or personality traits. They are people who believe bad events are just circumstantial and won’t continue to affect them. “You can accept accidents and do something about mistakes” is an optimist’s motto. The following examples illustrate these two viewpoints toward the same events:

- *“I wasn’t watching and stubbed my toe” versus “I’m so clumsy I’m always hurting myself.”*

- *“I forgot to do that report, so I need to get better organized” versus “I’m too dumb for this job.”*
- *“The garden was hailed out this year, but I’ll just try again” versus “Something bad is always happening to me.”*

Those individuals who see good times as part of a positive pattern created by personal abilities can keep their self-confidence even when troubles return. A positive cycle of thinking and acting is evident in the first versus the second of the examples below:

- *“I like my new neighborhood because I make great friends wherever I go” versus “I hate moving.”*
- *“It seems like when I’m in a hurry, the lights always turn green for me” versus “I always get a red light, especially when I’m late.”*
- *“My old friend was mean sometimes, but we had some fun times too” versus “Nobody wants to be my friend.”*

Believing that causes and consequences of bad events are permanent often leads a person to give up. Recognizing that sometimes things just happen that way or resolving to do better next time keeps a child focused on possibilities rather than problems.

### **Pervasiveness**

Optimists see mishaps as limited, achievements or good luck as steps in growth. If you see one failure as one failure rather than as a catastrophe that ruins everything, you can limit letdowns to the specific place and category. Examples of this critical difference in interpretation follow:

- *“Oh, I got off my diet but I can get back on track this week” versus “I’ll be a blimp for life.”*
- *“I got lost in the new school because I don’t know it yet” versus “I’m lost at everything I do.”*
- *“I didn’t make the team, but I’ll try out next year” versus “Nobody wants a loser like me.”*

People who see achievements as part of a larger pattern of making good things happen can build on assets and expand their sense of control. Positive attitudes about events may be expressed as follows:

- *“Another week with no missed homework shows I am making my day planner work” versus “I was lucky not to forget any appointments.”*







- *“It’s too bad Mom’s job doesn’t let her get to my baseball games” versus “My mom wouldn’t want to see me play.”*
- *“I forgot to feed the dog, that’s all” versus “Why can’t I remember anything?”*

Insisting that one mistake messes up an entire life creates a downward spiral of despair. Finding ways to build upon successes and move beyond failures creates a foundation for wellness.

### **Personalization**

Optimists don’t carry a burden of blame but give themselves credit to move on

If you blame events or other people, versus beating yourself up, you can look beyond the hopelessness of guilt or shame. Finding a scapegoat or refusing to take responsibility is not the issue. De-personalizing is letting go of burdensome guilt. Learning from events without taking them to heart is evident in the following examples:

- *“My friends were goofing off and my teacher didn’t care—no wonder I flunked math” versus “I will always be a failure at math.”*
- *“I get carried away playing and my room is a mess sometimes” versus “I can never please my dad.”*
- *“I do the best I can and expect others to do their part” versus “I guess I am paying for my stupid decisions.”*

If you feel like you can make good things happen, you gain the power to assert yourself and celebrate life. Putting events in perspective and realizing what you can and can’t do is an important step in making positive interpretations, as these examples illustrate:

- *“Those girls tease me and I’ll never be popular” versus “Nobody escapes those mean kids.”*
- *“I can’t believe my boss made me stack those boxes; I knew they would fall down” versus “It was my fault those boxes collapsed.”*
- *“I made a joke to hold off that bully, then reported him to the playground monitor” versus “I figured I deserved to get beat up.”*

Interpreting bad events as intentional or deserved often creates a pattern of defensiveness and inferiority. Taking appropriate responsibility and moving on to a constructive solution is acting optimistically.

### **Optimism in action**

#### **Learning from experience**

Imagine a time when you jumped to conclusions, thinking things were really worse than they were. Some incidents include

getting a poor grade on a test and believing you lacked ability in that subject, losing a friend or sweetheart and thinking you will never be loved by anyone, or being embarrassed in front of friends and becoming afraid to be noticed. Thinking back on those events, how did those conclusions affect your life? Did you give up on opportunities? Was your self-confidence low? Did you blame yourself?

Consider other times when you gained encouragement from an unusual success, de-

ecided to ignore a mistake, or learned from failure. What were you able to do by thinking optimistically?

### Limits to optimism

Optimistic interpretations help build confidence and persistence. Seeing the bright side does not mean never being sad, afraid, or angry. Helping children size up their chances, accept defeat with dignity, and cope with unexplainable losses is crucial for healthy development. Dwelling on negative possibilities and interpretations is not healthy.

## How adults can promote optimism in children

- ✎ Relax and gather the facts
- ✎ Laugh during and about hard times
- ✎ Model and teach logical problem solving
- ✎ Avoid negative generalizations (“You never...you’ll always...”)
- ✎ Help a child discover his or her talents
- ✎ Have patience and teach discipline for improving weaknesses
- ✎ Accept imperfection and failure as part of mastering a challenge
- ✎ Support hard work rather than fate as the key to success
- ✎ Affirm feelings, but help the child challenge negative interpretations
- ✎ Helping the child notice and be proud of a unique personality and abilities
- ✎ Celebrate accomplishments and emphasize learning from mistakes
- ✎ Help a child see self-improvement rather than compare himself or herself to others
- ✎ Spend free time with children to affirm worth beyond accomplishments
- ✎ Encourage new adventures with reminders of past success
- ✎ Hold the child accountable, but avoid blaming or reminders of failure
- ✎ Encourage a child’s competitors to emphasize trying, not just winning
- ✎ Help the child set positive goals, no matter how small or tentative
- ✎ Consider many viewpoints when interpreting events
- ✎ Thank a child for doing something special
- ✎ Ask for forgiveness when you’ve made a pessimistic judgment on the child

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