



# optimistic kids

## **An overview of optimism in psychological research**

Optimistic Kids is based on a scientifically proven program that builds children's resources and resilience through teaching children how to view any situation or incident in an optimistic way. This approach does not mean that negative or troubling events are trivialized into a falsely rosy picture, rather the skills of optimism allow the individual to look beyond the immediacy of a negative experience and learn from it, so as to navigate their way more effectively should that situation arise again. Through promoting optimism, the strengths and resilience of your child are fostered in a way that will translate into every other aspect of their lives, maximizing their sense of achievement and well-being. What's more, this program is designed to promote a way of thinking that will set your child up for life.

A significant amount of research on optimism has been carried out over the past 5 years. This research usually defines optimism as a cognitive (or thought-based) construct, a set of expectations about one's future that is markedly positive and hopeful (Ey *et al.*, 2005). In turn, a number of positive emotions and adaptive behaviours arise from this particular style of thinking. Psychologists now understand that optimism forms a critical part of both mental and physical well-being. Both children and adults with an optimistic outlook experience better health, and are much more likely to bounce back from adversity, including chronic illness or bereavement (Ey *et al.*, 2005). In terms of mental well-being, individuals with an optimistic outlook are much more likely to view negative events as transitory, their own actions as highly effective, and tend to have more friends (Peterson, 2000). They tend to experience greater success in academic, athletic, occupational and political fields, and, as a consequence, are much less likely to ever suffer depression or anxiety in their lives (Lockhart *et al.*, 2002; Peterson, 2000);

The single most exciting finding of all this research, however, is that *optimism may be taught*. It is malleable and flexible, and since it promotes problem solving, it allows the individual to respond in different, open-minded ways as the situation dictates (Farrall *et al.*, 2006; Abela *et al.*, 2002). Some researchers have suggested that children's optimism simply reflects their naivety and lack of insight about the real world, yet recent studies (e.g., Farrall & Taplin, 2004) have shown that very optimistic children can still view their world in an accurate, realistic way – sensitive to the rules and social conventions that govern our world.

It is important to note, however, that children's optimism tends to decline with age. This significant trend has been documented in several research studies (e.g., Lockhart *et al.*, 2002; Farrall & Taplin, 2004), and seems directly proportional to the onset of depression in early adolescence (Lockhart *et al.*, 2002; Abela *et al.*, 2002).

This is why fostering the optimism of children in a systematic way is so critical – this optimism does not *have* to decline, it can be maintained in a viable, adaptive way, so long as children are taught how to draw on the skills of optimism in a conscious way. Promoting and teaching optimism in this way will provide children and adolescents with a set of “thinking tools” that will allow them to navigate life in a more productive, happier, even healthier, way (Gillham & Reivich, 2004).

Martin Seligman, who developed the Penn Resilience Program upon which Optimistic Kids is based, stresses the importance of teaching children to always see the “glass half full”. Seligman argues that learning optimism is all that is needed to stave off feelings of helplessness – the forerunner of depression (Seligman, 1995a, 1995b, 1997). The skills of optimism promote children’s ability to master tasks, be confident in their own actions, view their setbacks as opportunities for growth, and interact with their parent, family, and peers in an active, resourceful way (Gillham & Reivich, 2004). In all, teaching children to be optimistic is the greatest protective step one can take to help ensure that they are resilient and thriving as they navigate our complex society.

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