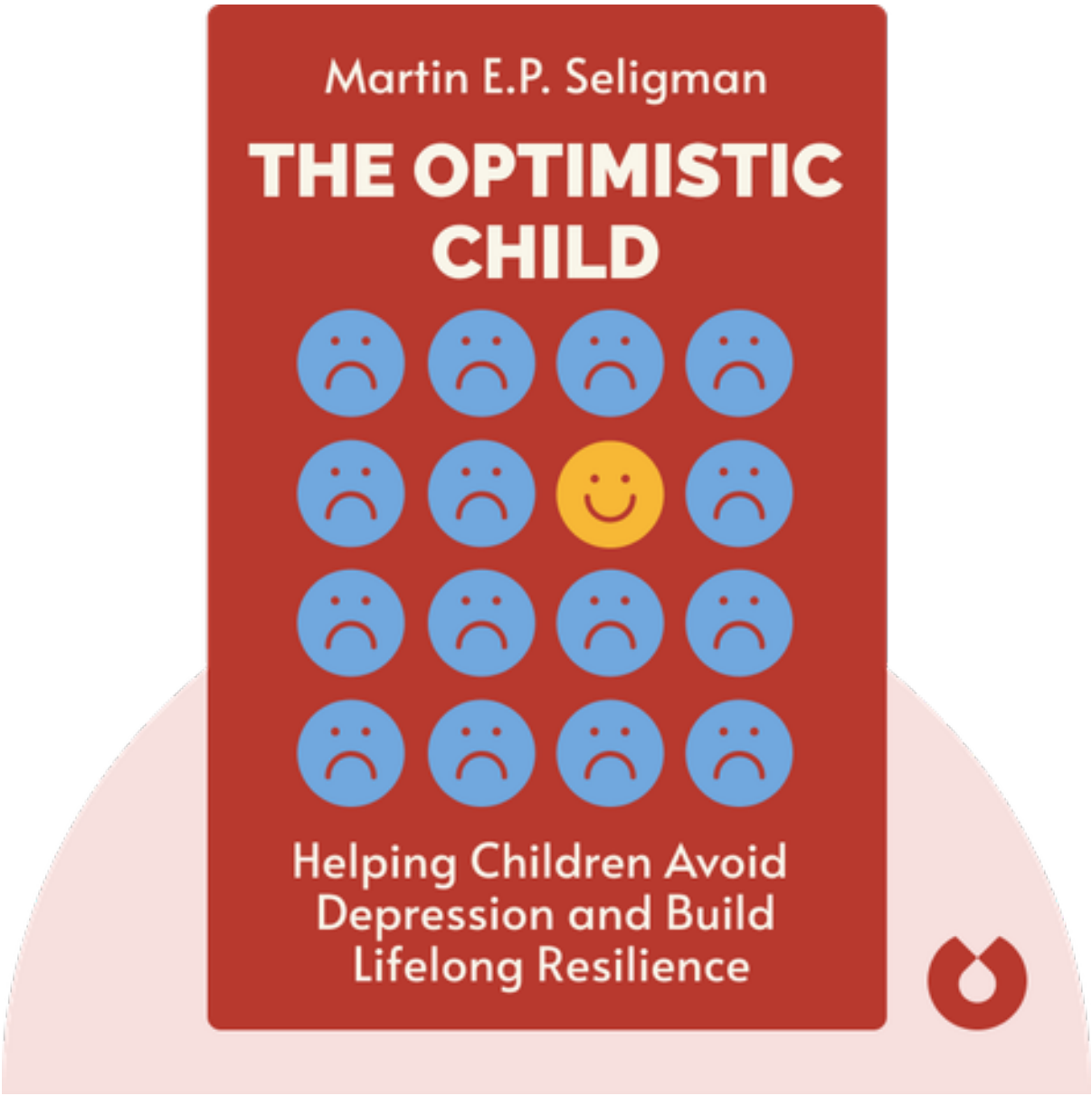

The Optimistic Child

A Proven Program to Safeguard Children Against Depression and Build Lifelong Resilience

By Martin E.P. Seligman

12-minute read

Synopsis

The Optimistic Child (1996) explores both the benefits of raising children to be optimistic and the dangers of pessimistic thinking. Drawing on psychologist Martin Seligman's seminal research, this practical guide explains how parents can instill optimism in their children and equip them with a healthy way of thinking.

Who is it for?

- Educators looking for a fresh perspective
- Parents seeking new insights
- Anyone suffering from depression and anxiety

About the author

Martin E.P. Seligman is an American psychologist, educator, and author who focuses on positive psychology and well-being. In 1998, Seligman was elected President of the American Psychological Association. He is currently the Zellerbach Family Professor of Psychology at the University of Pennsylvania.

What's in it for me? Help your child look on the bright side.

We all want our children to grow up happy and able to reach their full potential. But what if their thoughts and feelings are holding them back? In these blinks, you'll discover the dangerous consequences of pessimistic thinking and learn about the incredible power of its opposite: optimism.

Packed with psychological insights and practical advice, these blinks explore how you can raise your child to be an optimist – and, as a result, set them up for a lifetime of success and resilience.

In these blinks, you'll learn

- why everything you've been told about self-esteem is wrong;
- how you can change your child's mindset; and
- what children can do to solve their own problems.

Optimists come up with more positive explanations when things go wrong.

Conventional wisdom tells us that an optimist is a glass-half-full sort of person, while a pessimist sees the glass as half empty. But there's a lot more to optimism than that. In fact, where you stand on the optimism-pessimism spectrum impacts every area of your life, including your mental health.

A person with a pessimistic mindset will dwell on the *worst* possible explanation for something bad happening. For instance, if she fails an exam, a pessimist might think: "I failed this exam because I'm stupid. I'll never be able to succeed." An optimist in the same situation, on the other hand, might think: "I failed because I didn't study hard enough. Next time I'll work harder – and I'll do better."

The key message here is: Optimists come up with more positive explanations when things go wrong.

When a pessimist turns to worst-case scenarios about the future, it's known as *catastrophic thinking*. But pessimism isn't just about being downbeat about failure. A pessimistic mindset can negatively impact your whole life. The reason for this is that when you dwell on worst-case scenarios, you start feeling as if the future is bleak and that changing your situation is impossible. These feelings can quickly lead to symptoms of depression, such as low mood and listless behavior. Perhaps unsurprisingly, pessimistic children are more likely to become low achievers and be depressed later on in life.

The state of feeling powerless to change your situation is known as *learned helplessness*. When you're in a state of learned helplessness, you feel as if nothing you do matters. As a result, you often give up without even trying. While researching depression, the author, Martin Seligman, and his team found that extreme feelings of helplessness are one of the root causes of depression. They also found that optimists are more able to resist these feelings. When faced with adversity, optimists keep trying and aren't easily defeated. This may explain why they're less likely to suffer from depression than pessimists are.

Luckily, Seligman has discovered that it is possible to "unlearn" helplessness; all it takes is the right tools. Just as we immunize children against physical illnesses, you can immunize your child against pessimism – and help protect them from depression and low achievement.

This immunization works by teaching your child the cognitive skills that foster lifelong optimism, which we'll explore in the next blinks.

Our children have never been more depressed.

So how can you help your child be more optimistic? Many parents and educators think the answer lies in one simple concept: *self-esteem*. If we encourage our children to feel good about themselves, they believe, then surely optimism and a lower risk of depression will follow. But the link between self-esteem, optimism, and depression is complex.

Since the 1960s, schools and parents have focused on bolstering children's self-esteem. Schools ask them to write down all the reasons they're special, for example, or make posters proclaiming, "I love myself!" At baseball games, parents stand on the sidelines shouting, "You're doing a great job!" – even when their child is playing poorly. The highest priority, it seems, is boosting children's self-worth. So why are many of them so unhappy?

The key message here is: Our children have never been more depressed.

Rates of depression have been rising across the Western world since the 1950s. People are suffering from depression at an increasingly young age, too. In fact, a 1993 study found that nearly a third of American 13-year-olds had depressive symptoms.

So why isn't the self-esteem movement showing results? Why are our children feeling worse rather than better? The problem lies in a fundamental misunderstanding of what self-esteem actually *is*.

We're often given the message that self-esteem is all about how children *feel* about themselves. But feelings are just one aspect of self-esteem. The more important component is what a child *does*.

In fact, much of your self-esteem comes from how you *behave,* not how you feel. It comes from mastering skills, persisting with problems, meeting challenges,

and finding solutions to boredom and frustration. In other words, self-esteem arises as a result of *doing well*.

By simply encouraging children to feel good about themselves, parents and educators are trying to *directly* improve children's self-esteem – which isn't possible. This muddled approach explains the recent explosion in depression; we have changed from an achieving society to a feel-good society, one full of empty slogans and unrealistic emphasis on happiness over achievement.

Genuine optimism and high self-esteem aren't about teaching your child to feel special or happy all the time. In the following blinks, we'll look at how optimism really works.

Pessimistic children believe bad events have permanent and pervasive causes.

How do you define optimism? Many people would say that it's about adopting positive mantras or visualizing happy outcomes. But they'd be wrong – optimism isn't about these things at all. Instead, it's about how you think about the *causes* of events.

This is your *explanatory style*. It's made up of several *dimensions,* which you use to explain why an event – either positive or negative – has occurred. One of the most important of these dimensions concerns whether you see the causes of events as permanent or temporary.

The key message here is: Pessimistic children believe bad events have permanent and pervasive causes.

The pessimistic child believes that the things that cause bad events are permanent and can't be changed. Therefore, she reasons, bad things will keep happening in the future. For example, a pessimistic child might respond to a scolding by saying, "My Mom is the meanest!" This attributes the child's unhappiness to her mother's character – and character can't be changed.

An optimistic child, on the other hand, might say, "My mom is in the *worst* mood." The difference? Mood is temporary. So the optimistic child finds it easier to be hopeful about the future, and that, in turn, makes her more resilient to depression.

You can gauge your child's optimism by paying attention to the words she uses. If she talks about her failures by using words like "always" and "never," it's a sign she might have a permanent explanatory style and may be pessimistic. Words like "recently" and "sometimes," by contrast, suggest optimism.

The second dimension is *pervasiveness*. Pessimistic children believe that causes are *pervasive* – that the consequences of failure will be felt across many areas of their life, not just in the area they have failed in. A pessimistic child who fails to win an essay-writing competition might tell himself that he "sucks at everything."

In contrast, optimistic children believe the cause of failure is *specific;* doing badly in one respect doesn't mean they're doing badly *overall*. An optimistic child might also be upset at losing the essay competition, but he'll just think he failed because he "sucks at writing" – not at *everything*.

The optimistic child who doesn't believe that other parts of his life are affected by his failure can go ahead and have fun with his friends later in the day. The pessimistic child will spend the rest of the day alone in his bedroom, depressed and withdrawn; his pessimism has caused him to give up on everything, not just writing.

Optimistic children think about self-blame in a healthy way.

When something goes wrong, what do you do? More importantly, who do you blame? For children at risk of depression, the answer tends to be: "myself."

Self-blame is their answer to *personalization* – the assigning of blame when things go wrong. Unfortunately, this leads to chronic guilt, low-self esteem, and depression. On the other hand, children who routinely share the blame with other people or circumstances tend to have higher self-esteem and lower levels of guilt and shame. As you might expect, the optimistic child strikes a good balance between blaming themselves and looking for the cause of failure elsewhere.

The key message here is: Optimistic children think about self-blame in a healthy way.

Of course, you shouldn't teach your children to always blame the world for their problems. The reality is that we all make mistakes. Sometimes we mistreat people or handle situations badly. Encouraging children to avoid taking *any* blame isn't realistic or ethically sound.

But the optimistic child takes *accurate responsibility*, an important distinction. This means she holds herself accountable for what has gone wrong, but she doesn't blame herself so much that she feels overwhelmingly guilty.

For example, imagine two friends named Andrea and Lucy. Andrea upsets Lucy by telling her that she no longer wants to be friends. Afterward, she realizes that she's really hurt Lucy's feelings; she shouldn't have been so cruel, she tells herself. So she takes accurate responsibility. How? Well, first of all, she acknowledges that she's to blame for Lucy's hurt feelings. What she *doesn't* do is unduly shame herself or tell herself that she's a bad friend, nor does she see the incident as a reflection on her as a person.

Behavioral self-blame is another way that optimistic children learn to accept their share of blame. This kind of blame is both temporary and specific. For instance, an optimistic child who is grounded for hitting his sister will explain the situation by connecting his punishment to his behavior. He'll say, "I got grounded because I hit my sister."

Faced with the same situation, the pessimistic child is likely to engage in *general self-blame*. This type of blame is both permanent and pervasive, and it might manifest as thoughts such as, "I got grounded because I'm a bad kid."

To encourage healthy self-blame, make sure you criticize your child's *behavior* rather than his *character*. If you were the parent in our example, you should tell your child that his punishment was for hitting his sister – not for being "bad."

Modeling can help you and your child develop an optimistic mindset.

Here's some good news: with the right techniques, *anyone* can learn to think more optimistically. To do this, you'll need to master four basic cognitive skills. Once you do, you can pass these skills on to your children through both teaching and *modeling* – that is, practicing the behaviors you want your child to learn.

After all, it's one thing to tell a child something. It's another to walk the talk.

The key message here is: Modeling can help you and your child develop an optimistic mindset.

The first skill you'll need in your toolbox is *thought catching* – recognizing the negative thoughts that cross your mind when you feel bad. How do you do this? Well, imagine a mother who finds mornings tough – let's call her Lydia. At the start of the day, she often screams at her children, which she later regrets. But by practicing thought catching, Lydia learns to recognize that right after she screams, the thought that she's a terrible mother tends to cross her mind.

Once she's identified her negative thought pattern, Lydia can then practice *evaluation*. By closely looking at her negative thoughts, she's able to evaluate their accuracy. To do this, she makes two lists. The first consists of all the reasons she might be a bad mother; the second is all the reasons why she's actually a good one. In the end, her good mother list is the longer of the two. Considering this evidence, Lydia is less sure that she's such a terrible mother after all.

Next, Lydia tries to come up with *more accurate explanations* for her morning outbursts. She uses these to dispute her negative thoughts. She's not a morning person, she reasons, and she needs to work on her irritability during this time of day. This disrupts her chain of negative thinking – it helps her realize how illogical it is to conclude that she's a terrible mother simply because she isn't a morning person.

Now, Lydia isn't alone in her tendency to assume bad things. When things go wrong, pessimistic people generally tend to envision the worst possible outcomes. But the final skill for learning optimism, *decatastrophizing*, is all about focusing on the most *likely* outcome instead.

Let's say that Lydia's friend Eileen criticizes her for canceling their plans together. True to form, Lydia immediately begins to catastrophize, imagining that Eileen will probably want to end their friendship. But once she learns to evaluate the *likelihood* of these catastrophes happening, she begins to see that all this worrying is simply unnecessary.

You can equip your child with a framework for problem-solving.

Teaching your child to challenge their pessimistic thoughts will help them on their way to optimism. But when it comes to raising healthy children, optimism isn't enough. Once your children begin analyzing their problems accurately, they'll realize that there sometimes *is* a real problem they need to deal with.

In these cases, optimism alone won't make the problems go away. Instead, the optimistic child needs to learn how to *solve* them. Many of the challenges your child faces will center around his social skills – and for children prone to pessimism, social relationships may not come easily. However, you can help him in this department, too.

The key message here is: You can equip your child with a framework for problem-solving.

The first step toward better problem-solving skills is to teach your child to *slow down*.

Many children naturally react impulsively, which can lead to actions that they later regret. Instead, teach your child that good problem-solving means stopping and thinking for at least a minute before reacting. For instance, if someone bumps into your child in the school cafeteria, causing him to spill his lunch, his instinctive reaction might be to hit that person. But you can teach him that he shouldn't rush to action.

Once a child has managed to slow down, he can take the second step. That's *perspective taking* – thinking about *why* the other person acted the way she did and what she was thinking when she did it. We can often gauge people's perspectives by looking at their faces for clues. In the cafeteria, your child could look at the expression of the person who bumped him. If she looks angry, it's a sign she might have done it on purpose. But if she looks embarrassed or sad, it was probably an accident.

The third step in problem solving is *goal-setting*. Unlike the other two steps, goal-setting happens outside the heat of the moment. Let's say your child has upset a friend; goal-setting is where she says what she wants to happen, decides on a goal, and then lists all the ways she could achieve the goal. For instance, if her goal is to repair the friendship, then she could list actions like "do something nice for him," or "agree not to do the things that upset him again."

Optimism isn't a cure-all remedy for the challenges and adversity that life throws at us. But it can help you and your child tackle your challenges with resilience, hope, and a can-do attitude.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks:

Optimism isn't about cheerful slogans or wishful thinking. Instead, useful optimism means taking accurate responsibility for your actions and persevering through setbacks. You can help your children become more optimistic by teaching them to see their challenges as temporary and specific rather than permanent and all-consuming.

Actionable advice:

Help your child master the world.

The feeling of mastering a skill or task is an important part of optimism and self-esteem. You can start fostering this feeling in young children with something as simple as shopping. The next time you go to a store, let your child choose and pay for three items himself, and put the items into his own little bag. Small activities like this will give your child the sense that he has the ability to influence his world and make things happen.

Got feedback?

We'd love to hear what you think about our content! Just drop an email to remember@blinkist.com with *The Optimistic Child* as the subject line and share your thoughts!

What to read next: *Raising a Secure Child*, by Kent Hoffman, Glen Cooper, Bert Powell

Now that you know how to guide your children toward optimism, why not learn how you can raise them to be secure and resilient, too? The blinks to *Raising a Secure Child* outline the importance of infant attachment and emotional resilience. They'll also help you better understand your own insecurities so that you can avoid passing them on to your children. Of course, there's no such thing as perfect parenting, but if you'd like to strengthen your bond with your child, then head over to the blinks to *Raising a Secure Child*.