

# Helping Children Avoid Depression

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Today's children are at a higher risk for depression than any previous generation. Almost one in 10 children will experience a major depressive episode by the time they are 14 years old, and almost one in five will experience a major depressive episode before graduating from high school. The good news is, there is apparently something that parents and educators can do to decrease the likelihood that children will succumb to this statistic.

Research suggests that teaching children to think and problem-solve a certain way works to decrease the likelihood that children will become depressed. A team of psychologists developed an innovative school-based program which basically taught children how to be optimistic. Specifically, children learned to identify the negative beliefs they hold about themselves, others and the world, and then learn how to replace their pessimistic beliefs with more positive ones. It was much like a preventative form of cognitive behavioral therapy.

Children also learned to view failures and setbacks as temporary, instead of permanent; as specific to a time and place, instead of general; and as due to circumstances, rather than due to personal defects. For example, children were taught that one bad grade doesn't make them stupid; it means they have to study harder for the next test.

Researchers found that a group of fifth- and sixth-graders who received three months of training in these thinking skills ended up with significantly fewer depressive symptoms and better classroom behavior than a group who did not receive the training. Even two years after the study, children in the training group were only half as likely to have moderate to severe symptoms of depression as children in the control group.

So what is the application here? What do we want to be teaching and reminding our children?

Help your child maintain accurate, not overly negative, beliefs about himself, the world, and other people. Guide your child to reframe overly negative beliefs to be more specific and realistic. For example, a child who says "I can never do anything right" can be guided to reframe that statement to "I did poorly on my history test, but I made the basketball team and got an A on my geometry test." Or a child who says "Teachers are so mean" can be guided to reframe that statement to "My art teacher told me I had to finish my project by Monday." I call this skill "reining in your thoughts." In therapy, sometimes kids do "thought journals," but parents can casually interject these reminders whenever applicable.

Remind your child and guide your child to see for himself that setbacks and failures are temporary. For example, if your child is frustrated with the fact that she needs extra help with long division ("I'll never learn this!"), remind her that soon she will have the skill mastered and her annoyance will be a distant memory. Remind her that she felt similarly when learning to ride a bike.

Remind your child and guide your child to see that setbacks are specific to a time and a place, not applicable to every aspect of his or her life. For example, if your teenager says, "I am worthless, and no one will want to go out with me" when the girl said "no" to a date, guide him to understand that this particular girl said no, but this doesn't mean no girl will ever want to date him.

Remind your child and guide your child to see the circumstantial factors that contribute to setbacks. If your child thinks that no one likes him since only three kids came to his birthday party, remind him that it is summertime and many families are on vacation and busy with other obligations.

Depression is a complex disease that often is caused by a combination of biological, environmental, and personal or temperamental factors. This study is addressing one aspect of the personal causes of depression, namely the way a person thinks. Therefore, as the study concludes, this "thought training" will not absolutely ensure that a child does not become depressed, but it appears to give the child a better way of managing his emotions.

#### References

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Source; <http://psychcentral.com/blog/archives/2014/09/17/helping-children-avoid-depression/>