

# The Optimistic Classroom

## Presented by UCSB



### Why teach optimism?

Research says that optimism can:

- Immunize against helplessness and depression
- Improve physical health and lead to longer life
- Increase self-esteem and feelings of confidence
- Promote academic achievement, motivation, and self-concept
- Develop life-long learners
- Improve coping abilities
- Increase positive mood and morale
- Lead to perseverance and problem-solving
- Is connected with athletic, military, occupational, and political success
- Build positive subjective well-being

### What exactly do we mean by optimism?

In everyday use, optimism is sometimes thought of as wishful thinking, seeing the glass as half-full, or just hoping that everything will turn out okay. However, it is much more than that. A deeper meaning of optimism finds that it is part of one's personality called **Explanatory Style**.

Explanatory style is how we explain the causes of events and is made up of the **3 P's**: Permanence, Pervasiveness, and Personalization. When an event happens to a child, whether good or bad, the child will attempt to explain this event in terms of these dimensions (the 3 P's): **Permanence, Pervasiveness, Personal. Whether we pay attention to the 3 P's or not, they occur naturally.**

- 1) **Permanence** (Permanent vs. Temporary): **Children expressing optimism** see bad events as temporary and good events as permanent. **Children expressing pessimism** see good events as temporary and bad events as permanent. Here is an example:

*Interpreting a bad event:*

- My classmate is a mean person (permanent) vs. My classmate is in a bad mood (temporary)

*Interpreting a good event:*

- I got an 'A' on my paper because I studied hard this time (temporary) vs. I got an 'A' because I am a hard worker (global)

- 2) **Pervasiveness** (Specific vs. Global): **Children expressing optimism** view bad events as specific and good events as global. **Children expressing pessimism** view bad events as global and good events as specific. Think about the differences in the following examples:

*Interpreting a bad event:*

- I'm terrible at sports (global) vs. I'm terrible at basketball (specific)

*Interpreting a good event:*

- I'm smart at math (specific) vs. I am a good student (global)

- 3) **Personal** (Internal vs. External): **Children expressing optimism** children view good events as internal (and caused by them) and bad events as external (caused by others). **Children expressing pessimism** view good events as external and bad events as internal. For example:

*Interpreting a bad event:*

- I flunked my test because it was hard (external) vs. I flunked my test because I'm bad at math (internal)

*Interpreting a good event:*

- Johnny's my friend because I'm a nice person (internal) vs. Johnny's my friend because he likes to listen to my ipod (external)

**Take Away Message:** We can all be optimistic or pessimistic are times. However, we can watch how we think about events and when we are thinking in these ways:

**Bad events: ☹Pessimism = Permanent + Global + Internal = ☺Optimism : Good Events**

**Bad events: ☺Optimism = Temporary + Specific + External = ☹Pessimism: Good Events**

### **Ways to teach optimism**

- **Social learning:** Model an optimistic explanatory style for your students by talking through your thought patterns and exhibiting optimism in everyday conversations.
- **Cognitive training:** Encourage your students to observe the thoughts they use to explain both good and bad events. Discuss how these thoughts can affect their feelings. Use stories and examples to demonstrate how people can think about bad situations in specific, temporary, and external terms, you can teach your students to engage in optimistic self-talk.
- **Facilitating mastery and competence:** Whenever possible, give students assignments at their instructional level so they can master the material with success. This will help students feel in control of the work they produce. Divide more difficult lessons into small steps that are easy to achieve.
- **Focus on strengths:** It might seem that most students know what they're good at, but take time to state the obvious throughout the day. Talk to your students about what they are interested in and what they do well. You can also incorporate art activities that let them explore their strengths, talents, and hobbies.
- **Positive and constructive feedback:** When praising, try to be specific. Instead of "good job," say "You have been good at turning in your assignments." Make praise meaningful and dependent on the student's work and offer more praise for more difficult tasks. Also, praise effort as well. When giving corrective feedback, make sure it is changeable and temporary, for example, "You are having a hard time paying attention in math today." Also, make the specific comments and let child know it is her or his behavior that is the cause ("You did poorly the test this time, so try studying harder for next time").
- **Reinforcement of good behavior:** By utilizing positive behavioral management techniques in your classroom, you will draw more attention to the behaviors your students do well than the behaviors your students either do poorly or don't do at all.