



By Gregory Ramey, PhD, child psychologist at Dayton Children's and *Dayton Daily News* columnist

Part II - Childhood depression: How can parents raise optimistic children?

The increase in childhood depression is difficult to understand. It's tempting to attribute the increase to factors beyond our control - social trends, genetic predispositions or perhaps even the food we eat. A noted psychologist, Dr. Martin Seligman, argues that the way we raise our children has contributed significantly to their vulnerability to this mental disorder. In [*The Optimistic Child*](#), Seligman identified parenting approaches that inadvertently help to produce depressed children.

Seligman argued that contemporary parents focus excessively on kids' feelings rather than accomplishments. Acquiring things becomes more important than developing meaningful relationships. Individual wants take priority over group needs. When things go wrong, the focus is on blaming others rather than accepting personal responsibility. Positive self esteem is valued over actual achievements. Praise and recognition become freely dispensed entitlements rather than based upon substantial accomplishments.

The way we raise our children results in entitled and overprotected kids who are ill prepared for the real world. Kids can't deal with stress or failure, and subsequently are more likely to become despondent and pessimistic.

The antidote to such pessimism is what Seligman refers to as an "ABC model" of parenting.

1. **The A stands for adversity or the bad event that occurred.** Pessimistic kids tend to catastrophize and exaggerate unpleasant situations. If a child is not invited to a party, he is apt to declare that "no one likes him." A youngster who did poorly on a test reports that she "always" fails math exams. Parents need to challenge such hyperbole, helping kids come to a realistic and specific description of the disturbing event.

2. **The B in the ABC model stands for the underlying belief systems.** We all deal with distasteful events, but depressed kids think of them in different ways. Seligman points out that pessimistic kids tend to think of bad events as both global and permanent. A depressed youngster who struck out a baseball game reports that she always does poorly under stress (i.e., global) and nothing can be done about it (permanent). Such kids also have problems with identifying fault, typically either always blaming themselves or always blaming someone else. Correcting these underlying faulty belief systems is critical in treating depression. It's important for parents to be helpful not empathetic. Don't try to make your children simply feel better. Rather, at the right time challenge their faulty belief systems that are leading to their pessimism.
3. **The C in this model represents the consequences that occur as a result of the adverse event.** Depressed kids exaggerate and misinterpret consequences. Reporting that "everyone on the team now hates me and will never be my friend" represents a misinterpretation that is global ("everyone"), permanent ("never") and incorrect.

Seligman's *The Optimistic Child* gives lots of specific examples and strategies to help parents prevent negative attitudes and incorrect ways of viewing common negative events. It's a great way to prepare kids for the real world and protect them against the serious mental disorder of childhood depression.

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