

Guide 9

Helping children develop resilient thinking styles



We can identify and interrupt young children's non-resilient thinking patterns so that they do not become habits. As discussed in Guide 4, "Me/Always/Everything" thinking patterns can lead to depression, and "Not me/Always/Everything" thinking patterns can lead to aggression.

A recent study by Dr. John Abela, of McGill University, supports the need to help children challenge their emerging explanatory beliefs. The study found that children with a pattern of negative and self-critical thoughts were more susceptible to depression than those with a more positive outlook.¹ Children whose parents were depressed were more likely to exhibit thinking styles associated with depression ("Me/Always/Everything" thinking).

Children in the study were given "optimism training." They were taught to challenge "pessimistic" styles of thinking with good results. Abela recommends that schools offer this type of training to help children handle daily stresses and to reduce the risk of childhood depression.²

How do we challenge children's non-resilient thinking patterns?

Challenging children's emerging explanatory styles involves helping them develop more accurate and flexible thinking. We can start by first acknowledging their feelings, then gently challenging their assessments of situations. Here's an example:

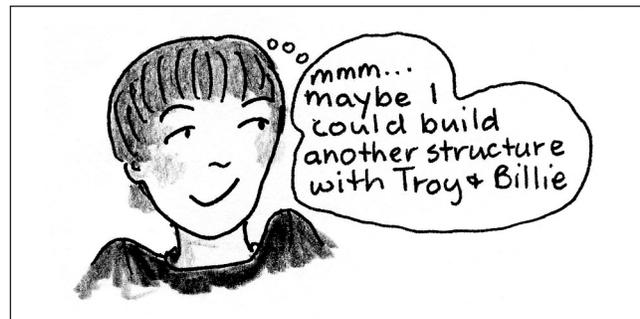
David and Maurico are friends, who've been playing together all morning. After lunch, Maurico is playing on a teeter-totter with Robert. When David tries to join them, they tell him only two can play on the teeter-totter.

Here's how David explains the situation:

I never get to play with Maurico ("Always" thinking). Maurico doesn't like me anymore because I'm stupid ("Me" thinking). David is so glum that when his teacher suggests another activity, he tells her, "The other kids don't like me!" and "There is nothing to do at daycare" ("Everything" thinking).

To challenge David's "Me/Always/Everything" thinking

- help him understand that Maurico just wanted to play with his other friend for a while. That doesn't mean Maurico doesn't like David ("Not me" thinking).
- remind him that he was playing with Maurico just that morning, and that they had fun ("Not always" thinking)
- challenge his belief that he has no other friends by talking about the enjoyable time he had yesterday building the structure with Troy and Billie. Help him remember all the activities that he likes at daycare ("Not everything" thinking).



We can help children practice accurate and flexible thinking by engaging them in activities such as the puppet play on page 37, which allows them to challenge a character's "Always/Everything" beliefs.

What does one teacher say about helping children develop resilient thinking habits?

Doing the puppet play helped me assess a certain child's emerging explanatory style. In my interactions with that child later on, it helped me understand how I could program for this child to help her challenge her "Always" thinking by giving her opportunities to think of alternative ways to look at the situation. Also, I find it helps children to hear what their peers say about a situation—it can help a child hear that there are other ways of looking at it, not just her way. So I'm doing a lot more group work, where children can sort of mentor each other. —LD (kindergarten)

Not Always Nessie

(A Puppet Play to Challenge “Always/Everything” Thinking)



Narrator: Once upon a time, there was a child care centre where children came to stay while their families were busy. The children and teachers spent the days together playing and learning new things.

Q: What do you think the children did when they were playing? (Gather answers from children.)

Narrator: They also had lunch, rest time, and snack.

Q: I wonder what their favourite lunch was? What about snack? (Gather answers from children.)

Narrator: Nessie was one of the children at the child care centre (show puppet).

Nessie: I *never* get to play with the toys I want. I *never* get a turn to play with Jody. I *always* have to play by myself. I am *never* going to have any friends.

Narrator: Nessie was feeling so mad and sad. She sat in the corner with a big frown on her face. Her teacher, Karen (show puppet), came and sat beside her.

Karen: Hi, Nessie. You look so mad and sad. What’s the matter?

Nessie: I hate this place. I *never* get to play with the toys I want. I *always* have to play by myself. I’m *never* going to have any friends.

Karen: Oh dear! You’re feeling very unhappy right now. Let’s talk about this.

Nessie: (nods quietly) Okay.

Karen: Remember this morning when you and Jody built the block tower? You were playing together. You were laughing and smiling. You looked like friends having fun.

Nessie: Yeah, but now she is playing with Jessica. I’m all by myself. I’ll *never* have any friends.

Q: Nessie believed if she didn’t play with Jody now, she would never have any friends. What do you think? (Gather answers from children.)

Karen: It’s disappointing you aren’t playing with Jody right now, but does that mean that you’ll *never* have any friends? It’s not *always* like this. Sometimes you play with Jody, sometimes you play by yourself, and sometimes you play with other children. (pause) Let’s think of some things you could do to enjoy the rest of your day.

Q: What are some things Nessie could do to enjoy the rest of her day? (Gather answers from children and summarize, for example, “Nessie realized there were lots of things she could do to enjoy her time at daycare.”)

Summary of Guide 9

Helping children develop resilient thinking styles



- We can identify and interrupt children's *emerging* thinking styles so they don't become habits.
- This is an important step in *promoting* resilience and *preventing* depression and violence.
 - "Me/Always/Everything" explanatory styles can lead to depression.
 - "Not me/Always/Everything" explanatory styles can lead to aggression.
- Challenging children's *emerging* explanatory styles involves helping them develop more accurate and flexible thinking.
- We can help children develop more accurate and flexible thinking by
 - first acknowledging their feelings
 - then gently challenging their thinking about situations
- Teachers can identify children's "Always" and "Everything" statements and suggest more positive alternatives.

