RESILIENCE PRACTICE FRAMEWORK

Guide 5: Increasing self efficacy

A framework to promote resilience in children and families
We are The Benevolent Society
We help people change their lives through support and education, and we speak out for a just society where everyone thrives.

We’re Australia’s first charity. We’re a not-for-profit and non-religious organisation and we’ve helped people, families and communities achieve positive change for 200 years.

Authors
The Resilience Practice Framework was developed in partnership by the Parenting Research Centre and The Benevolent Society. The framework was developed by:

Laura Baldwin  
Senior Research Officer, Parenting Research Centre

Dr Robyn Mildon  
Director, Knowledge Exchange, Parenting Research Centre

Greg Antcliff  
Director, Professional Practice, The Benevolent Society

Acknowledgements
The Practice Resource Guides are based on the original guides in PracticeWise Evidence-Based Services (PWEBs) database, drawn from child and family therapeutic intervention outcome studies (PracticeWise, 2009), adapted with permission.

June 2015

The Benevolent Society  Parenting Research Centre
Level 1, 188 Oxford Street  Level 5, 232 Victoria Parade
Paddington NSW 2021  East Melbourne Victoria 3002
T 02 8262 3400  T 03 8660 3500
F 02 9360 2319  F 03 8660 3599

resilience@benevolent.org.au  info@parentingrc.org.au

©Parenting Research Centre and The Benevolent Society, 2015
All rights reserved. This work is copyright. Except under the conditions described in the Copyright Act 1968 of Australia and subsequent amendments, no part of this publication may be stored in a retrieval system, communicated or transmitted in any form or by any means without prior written permission. The Practice Resource Guides master materials may be produced by individuals in quantities sufficient for non-commercial use. Requests and enquiries concerning reproduction rights should be directed in writing to the Parenting Research Centre and The Benevolent Society.
**Table of Contents**

What the research tells us 5

Evidence informed practices:

- Praising for effort and persistence 7
- Setting goals for success 10
- Identifying negative thinking traps 12
- Challenging negative thinking 15
- Strategies to challenge negative thinking traps 18

References 23
## Increasing self efficacy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domains of resilience (resilience strings)</th>
<th>Evidence informed practice</th>
<th>Practice elements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Talents and Interests</td>
<td>Praising for effort and persistence</td>
<td>Process praise versus trait praise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Education regarding benefits of process praise and clarifying when trait praise may be beneficial (e.g. during skill acquisition)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Model process praise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Secure Base</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domains of resilience (resilience strings)</th>
<th>Evidence informed practice</th>
<th>Practice elements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Talents and Interests</td>
<td>Setting goals for success</td>
<td>Assisting a child to set effective goals that are:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Measurable, specific and achievable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Build on child’s strengths</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Avoid perfectionism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Celebrate incremental steps to success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Secure Base</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Positive Values</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domains of resilience (resilience strings)</th>
<th>Evidence informed practice</th>
<th>Practice elements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Talents and Interests</td>
<td>Identifying negative thinking traps</td>
<td>Educating children and parents about the difference between normal worries and anxiety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Providing child friendly strategies for identifying negative thinking styles ‘traps’, e.g. key words such as ‘always’ and ‘never’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Introduce the child and parent to eight forms of negative thinking traps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Secure Base</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domains of resilience (resilience strings)</th>
<th>Evidence informed practice</th>
<th>Practice elements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Talents and Interests</td>
<td>Challenging negative thinking traps</td>
<td>Assist child to gather evidence and challenge negative thinking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Re-evaluate negative thinking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Problem solving, once the child is calm, use problem solving strategies to address the issue that triggered the negative thought/feeling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Secure Base</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domains of resilience (resilience strings)</th>
<th>Evidence informed practice</th>
<th>Practice elements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Talents and Interests</td>
<td>Strategies to challenge negative thinking traps</td>
<td>Strategies include:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Modelling positive thinking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• All or nothing thinking (Removing the ‘negative glasses’)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Overgeneralising (‘Disaster thinking’)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Catastrophising (Defusing the ‘mental bomb’)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Personalising (Playing the ‘blame game’)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• The mind reader (It’s not all about me)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Magnification and minimisation (The rubbish bin)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Emotional reasoning (Separate fact from fiction)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• ‘Should’ and ‘must’ statements (Softening rigid rules)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Secure Base</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What the research tells us

Self efficacy is one of the fundamental building blocks of resilience. Self efficacy may be understood as including the feelings and thoughts that individuals have about their competence and worth, about their abilities to make a difference, and to confront rather than retreat from challenges. The development of self efficacy is central to human agency, self-regulation, and a child’s participation in activities and environments.

Sources of self efficacy
The support and expectations of significant caregivers contribute greatly to children’s beliefs of competence. According to social learning theory (Bandura, 1982), children’s perceptions of competence are not innate but develop over time through direct success experiences and feedback from significant adults, particularly parents and teachers (Bandura, 1986; Bouffard & Vezeau, 1998; Philipps & Zimmerman, 1990). Children who perceive that they can rely on their parents’ support, over and above their level of achievement, come to believe in their own value as a person. This is reflected in studies which show positive relationships between children’s competence, beliefs and their perceptions of the availability of their parents’ support, regardless of the outcome of their participation (Bois, Sarrazin, Brustad, Chanal & Trouilloud, 2005; Bouffard, Roy & Vezeau, 2006). Children who receive strong messages that they have the skills and capabilities to manage challenging situations are more likely to put in greater effort and to persist in the face of setbacks and adversity. However, children who view performance as a function of a fixed inherent capacity, such as intelligence, are less likely to seek challenges that expand on their knowledge and competencies (Bandura & Dwec, 1988).

Strategies to enhance self efficacy
Use process praise. Process praise, in which children are praised for their efforts and the strategies they used to bring about a success (e.g. “You did well because you kept at it and tried different ways to solve the problem”), can lead to greater mastery, persistence, and achievement than praising children for fixed innate qualities such as intelligence (e.g. “You did well because you’re so smart!”). Process praise was examined in a study that assessed children’s performance during a problem solving task (Kamins & Dweck, 1999). Children in one group were allocated to receive process praise (complimenting the child for the effort or strategy behind a specific behaviour) while the other group received trait praise (complimenting the child for an innate, fixed quality). During the ‘setback’ task, children who had initially received trait praise displayed significantly more helpless responses (including self-blame), rated themselves as less ‘smart,’ less ‘good’, and less ‘nice’, and were less likely to show persistence to remedy the setback than the children in the process-feedback group. These findings suggest that trait feedback, even when positive, can create vulnerability and a sense of contingent self-worth. In contrast, praise for persistence encourages children to better manage setbacks and mistakes by motivating them to increase their efforts in order to succeed. This in turn increases the child’s level of interest in the activity, improves their overall performance on the task, and encourages children to exhibit resilient self efficacy, even in the face of challenging situations.

Challenge negative thoughts
Adults can help children strengthen self efficacy beliefs by teaching them to identify and challenge negative thoughts that undermine their belief in their ability to master a task. Once children and young people are adept at recognising unhelpful thoughts, they can be taught to challenge negative thoughts about themselves or a situation, by helping them to use evidence to create more rational and realistic thoughts. Such approaches include assisting the child to maintain perspective by focusing on facts and reality, and suggesting the child use more helpful self-talk (Master & Noble, 2011). For example, for a child who says “I’m scared of big dogs in public”, an adult could suggest the child use the thought: “Big dogs scare me sometimes, but I can be brave when I see one walk past”.

Set goals for success
Teaching children how to set realistic goals and strategies for persisting in achieving those goals when they encounter obstacles helps them to experience greater mastery in life. Helping children to increase their pathways thinking (thinking that helps identify or create many paths to a goal) and agency thinking (thinking that helps keep motivation up while pursuing a goal) helps them experience greater hope and more success in achieving the goal.
Provide opportunities for mastery experiences
Creating opportunities for children to set goals, plan, and try different paths to achieve their goals will help build self efficacy. This requires genuinely knowing the child’s strengths and being able to link those to their goals (Noble, 2003). Children should be encouraged to put strengths into action. For example, if a child enjoys and has a talent for singing or music, they might be encouraged to join the school band. Supporting older children to undertake new responsibilities such as a leadership role at school or a part time job are other ways to build confidence and a sense of achievement.

This guide is focused on encouraging parents and other significant caregivers in children’s lives to see the strong influence they have in shaping the way a child perceives his or her own competencies. Focusing their praise on effort and persistence, and helping children identify their strengths in order to respond to challenges are effective ways to help children feel confident in their skill and guide them toward achieving goals.

Teaching skills to increase self efficacy
The following practices have been selected to assist practitioners to teach parents and children strategies to enhance their self efficacy and sense of competence. Practitioners may choose to teach these strategies to parents or to children directly. Wherever possible, it is recommended that practitioners introduce these concepts to both parents and children together. This will enhance learning and will ensure the concepts and skills are being practised in between sessions with the family.
Praising for effort and persistence

**WHO**
Parents/caregiver; pre-school, school-aged child

**WHERE**
Agency, home setting

**HOW**
One-on-one parent training; practitioner modelling

Process praise involves complimenting the child for the effort or strategy behind a specific behaviour; “You worked hard!” In contrast, trait praise refers to an innate, fixed quality in the child; “You are so smart!” Process praise tends to be motivating, to increase self-confidence, and to lead to mastery behaviour, while trait praise promotes avoidance of challenges and greater fear of failure. This is because children who are only praised for global abilities (such as intelligence) believe they should not need the effort to succeed, and thus, when faced with a challenge that outstrips their abilities, tend to feel overwhelmed and give up more easily. Praise for persistence encourages the child to better manage setbacks and mistakes by motivating them to learn a new skill and increase their efforts in order to succeed. This increases the child’s level of interest in the activity, improves their overall performance on the task, and is consistently associated with encouraging mastery-oriented qualities.

**Outcomes**
- Increased self confidence and self efficacy
- Increased persistence and search for constructive solutions to resolve setbacks
- Increased intrinsic motivation, particularly in the face of difficult tasks
- Improved academic performance
- Increased value on effort.

**How you do it:**

Provide parents with explanation between trait-based praise and process praise

Key message: Praise is better when it is actionable, and not tied to a child’s intrinsic qualities

- Person (or trait) praise may convey to the child that their internal traits, such as intelligence, are the only things that matter. Children who believe in fixed traits (e.g. fixed intelligence or personality) become overly focused on measuring these traits from their performance.
- In addition, children who are only rewarded with trait praise judge their self-worth only from outward performance. Therefore, trait feedback, even when positive, creates a sense of contingent self-worth.
- It also conveys that these traits are deep-seated and are unchangeable. When faced with a setback or a new task which they may not necessarily have the ability to master, these children tend to give up more easily.
Provide rationale for process praise

Key message: Praise for effort and persistence increases a child’s confidence, and leads to a strong sense of self-worth that is not contingent upon success

- Praising a child for their effort increases a child’s belief that they can build on success. This is because praising for effort tells the child that if they persist with a problem, they may resolve it.
- Children praised for effort are more likely to believe that their abilities are not fixed. Thus, they are more willing to work harder to improve their skills, knowledge, and areas they can change through learning.
- Finally, effort-praised children remain more confident and eager when working on difficult problems.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trait praise compared to process praise</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Example 1</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Trait praise</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You are so smart, you got 18/20 on your spelling test!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Process praise</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You really studied for your spelling test, and your improvement shows it. You read the material over several times, outlined it, and tested yourself on it. That really worked!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Example 2</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Trait praise</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You are so kind.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Process Praise</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You thought of a wonderful way to help that boy. Sharing your toy with him made him happy.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcome of trait versus process praise</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Trait Praise</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact on how child views self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child views abilities and self as unchangeable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response to difficult task/challenging situation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoidance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persistence after difficulty or failure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance on other tasks after initial setback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impaired</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Process Praise</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child views abilities as malleable; achievement and success is a matter of effort and implementing effective strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enthusiastic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improved</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Helpful hints and tips:

**Person or (trait) praise can be useful in the early stages of skill acquisition.** Providing trait praise that emphasises the child’s ability (such as “You are good at this”) in the early stages of learning a new task enhances self efficacy and leads to higher expectations for future performance. Once the child has established confidence in their abilities, this type of praise can gradually be faded and/or combined with process praise (“You tried really hard on that test”) during later stages of the skill acquisition.

**Resist the temptation to equate a child’s efforts or strengths with intelligence.** Encourage parents to resist the temptation to reflect their child’s efforts as an outcome or indication that they are ‘smart’. For example, “You built that block tower so tall—you are so smart” or “You worked really hard on that spelling test—you are so smart!” The process praise on its own will be much more beneficial to the child in the longer term.

**Sincere praise is important.** A child who has acquired only very basic skills in a domain is unlikely to believe praise for high ability until more elaborate skills have been developed or greater success is achieved. Praise for hard work also may be discounted when children have explicitly not worked hard or when they do not perceive that the person providing praise has been able to genuinely evaluate how hard they worked. Another risk is that children who are often given vacuous praise tend to discount sincere praise as well.

**Be mindful of developmental age when giving praise.** Praise given for easy tasks may translate into a positive message for younger children but into a negative message for older children, who interpret high praise of effort as a signal of low ability.
Setting goals for success

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WHO</th>
<th>Caregiver; pre-school, school-aged child</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WHERE</td>
<td>Agency, home setting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HOW</td>
<td>Practitioner led, one-on-one</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Goal attainment enhances a child’s self confidence and future performance and efforts. In contrast, unrealistic goals undermine performance. In striving for perfection in achievement, for example, the child may risk feeling unwilling or unable to make the effort to reach such goals. Setting a number of short-term goals as opposed to setting a single distant goal assists goal attainment. This may be because the reinforcement of successive small steps is much more motivating than the reinforcement of a single large step which may take some time to reach.

Outcomes
- Increased self confidence and self efficacy
- Increased persistence and search for constructive solutions to resolve setbacks
- Increased intrinsic motivation, particularly in the face of difficult tasks
- Improved academic performance.

How you do it:

**STEP 1: Provide rationale**
- Assisting a child to set goals for success requires helping them to transform broad, general and non-specific goals into more specific life situations and behaviours that can be identified and worked on.
- Transforming problems into specific, observable goals can help counter a child from feeling demoralised and therefore giving up early on the task at hand. Setting realistic goals for success produces some relief and optimism, meaning that the child is more likely to not only attempt tasks, but actually achieve their goals and feel good about their abilities in doing so.

**STEP 2: Set goals based on existing strengths**
- Have the caregiver reflect on the skills, support and resources that their child already has. Use these as a starting point for any future plans.
- Encourage the parent to motivate their child to remain committed to achieving their goals by highlighting these strengths along the way.

**STEP 3: Set well defined goals**
- Advise the child and/or parent that goals need to be well-defined, otherwise their attainment may go without recognition.
- Use the 4 Ws acronym to help the child remember what needs to be included when setting a goal:
  1) What will be done
  2) Who will do it
  3) When it will be done
  4) How well
### STEP 4: Select success indicators

- Help the child find a way to measure his progress.
- Apply a test to the choices of measurements. For example,
  - (a) Can you see it? (e.g. "If someone were to ask you what it would look like if you were making headway with your goal, what would you tell them?")
  - (b) Can you count it? (time it)
- Once the baseline is established, we can measure progress from the baseline. That is, any progress above baseline is considered to be positive movement and change.

### STEP 5: Reinforce effort and focus on small successive steps

- Demonstrating a positive attitude, so that the child is encouraged through a ‘you can do it’ mindset.

---

⚠️ **Helpful hints and tips:**

### Some other questions that might assist children to identify success include:

- How will you know if you are making progress in a positive direction towards your goal?
- What will you be doing differently?
- What will others be doing differently?
- What would be happening tomorrow that is different from today?
- Who will notice a difference?
- What will others notice that is different about you?

**Expand on the definition of success.** Encourage the parent to define their child’s success in terms of the child’s intangible, enduring qualities, as opposed to concrete outcomes of their performance. These may include:

- Happiness
- Resilience
- Persistence
- Generosity
- Compassion
- Capacity to build and maintain meaningful relationships
- Creativity

---

⚠️ **Further resources**

- A great source for identifying a child’s intangible qualities (as listed above) is a free online questionnaire developed by researchers Martin Seligman and Christopher Peterson.
- Encourage parents to complete the questionnaire with their older children and teenagers (it takes around 45 minutes). Once completed, they may choose the top three qualities and write it down on a card for the child to keep, either in their room, next to their desk, or in their wallet. The questionnaire is located at: [www.viastrengths.org](http://www.viastrengths.org)
Identifying negative thinking traps

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WHO</th>
<th>WHERE</th>
<th>HOW</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Children and adolescents</td>
<td>Agency, home setting</td>
<td>Practitioner led, one-on-one</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Teaching children to understand their thoughts is important. Children with anxiety or who have low self-esteem tend to overthink in negative and critical ways; overestimate the likelihood of ‘bad things’ happening, focus on things that go wrong, underestimate their ability to cope, and expect to be unsuccessful. Teaching children (and their caregivers) to recognise negative thoughts involves (a) providing education about the difference between normal and abnormal worries and anxiety, (b) providing education about negative ways of thinking or ‘thinking traps’ and, (c) helping the child identify and challenge their negative thinking traps.

Outcomes
- Increased self confidence and self efficacy
- Increased persistence and search for constructive solutions to resolve setbacks
- Decreased internalising and externalising symptoms
- Improved academic performance.

How you do it:

**STEP 1: Provide information about anxiety**

Normalise anxiety and provide children and parents with an explanation of when anxiety becomes maladaptive.

For example:

- Anxiety is a *normal* emotion – it helps us cope with difficult, challenging or dangerous situations.
- Anxiety is *common* – there are times when we all feel worried, anxious, uptight or stressed.
- But anxiety *becomes a problem* when it stops you from enjoying normal life by affecting school, work, family relationships, friendships or your social life.

**STEP 2: Provide information about worrying thoughts**

Make the link between the way children think about things and their feelings of anxiety. For example, explain to the child (and/or parent) that people who feel worried may often think:

- Things will go wrong
- We will be unsuccessful
- We will be unable to cope

Check in with the child to see whether these thoughts apply to them.

For example, “*I wonder if any of these things sound familiar to you? Which one sounds the most familiar? What situations do these thoughts tend to pop up in?”* [e.g. at school, with friends, or in extra-curricular activities].
**STEP 3: Make the connection between worrying thoughts and anxiety**

Summarise by explaining how worrying thoughts contribute to negative feelings.
For example, “Life can seem like one big worry as our minds become full of negative and worrying thoughts. We can’t seem to stop them, we might find it hard to concentrate in school or when talking to friends. These worrying and negative thoughts seem to make feelings in our bodies worse too. I wonder if this is true for you?”

**STEP 4: Introduce negative thinking traps**

Teach the child (and parent/caregiver) to recognise their negative thinking traps. A good place for parents and children to start listening for these styles of thinking is for words expressing extremes, such as ‘nothing’, ‘everything’, ‘always’ and ‘never’.

For example:
“We know that some thoughts are unhelpful. But there are some things you can do to beat these thoughts that make you feel bad. The first step is to catch them. We have already written down some of the worried thoughts that leave you feeling bad. Let’s have a look at them now and see whether they fit any of these thinking traps.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Negative Thinking Traps</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trap 1  The negative glasses</td>
<td>Only lets you see that negative things happen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trap 2  The rubbish bin</td>
<td>Anything that is good doesn’t count; instead you throw it away in a mental rubbish bin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trap 3  The mental bomb</td>
<td>Negative things are blown up and become scarier and bigger and so much harder to face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trap 4  Disaster thinking</td>
<td>Makes us think that the worst thing we could imagine will happen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trap 5  The mind reader/fortune teller</td>
<td>We think we know what everyone is thinking, we think we know what is going to happen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trap 6  The blame game</td>
<td>When things don’t turn out as expected, we think that we (or another person) are the cause</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trap 7  Feelings are facts thinking</td>
<td>Makes me think that because I feel it, it must be true</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trap 8  Rigid rules</td>
<td>We think that there is one way that we or others should behave and anything else is not good enough</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Increasing self efficacy

### Common indicators for a child who tends to use negative thinking include:

- Exaggerating and extending the importance of a difficult or negative event.
- Blaming themselves for something outside their control, or for small mistakes.
- Generalising that whenever something ‘bad’ happens, it ‘always’ happens.
- Becoming easily angry with themselves (e.g. throwing away a picture they have drawn that they feel is not good enough).
- Not attempting a new activity.
- Having great difficulty with tolerating their feelings when they make a mistake or lose a game/activity.

### Helpful hints and tips:

**STEP 5: Check in with the child and set homework task**

Once the child is familiar with the concept, ask the child to be on the lookout for their negative thinking traps over the next week(s).

Have the parent and child compile a list of the child’s negative thoughts. For children who may be less aware of their thoughts, ask the child to write down two or three thoughts. Some questions to help the child focus might be: *What were you thinking when you felt at your (a) happiest and (b) worst today? If we put a microphone to your head, what was your mind saying during those times?*

Ask them to write down:

- **The situation** (e.g. doing a maths exam)
- **The thought** “I’m going to fail this for sure”
- **The negative thinking trap** (e.g. The Fortune Teller/ Disaster Thinking).

**STEP 6: Teach the child to challenge negative thinking**

See the practices of *Challenging negative thinking* page 15 and *Strategies to challenge negative thinking traps* page 18.
Challenging negative thinking

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WHO</th>
<th>WHERE</th>
<th>HOW</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Caregiver; pre-school, school-aged child</td>
<td>Agency, home setting</td>
<td>Practitioner led, one-on-one</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Children who exhibit negative thinking styles tend to see things that are wrong with themselves, the world, and the future. These children emphasise problems: “Nothing ever works for me. There is no point. I give up”. This negativity creates emotional hurdles that often hinder children from experiencing success, which results in lower levels of self efficacy and confidence. Parents can buffer children and adolescents from disappointment, failure and frustration by helping them think more accurately about their problems. Once parents have acknowledged the child’s feelings and concerns about the situation, parents can gently challenge their child’s assumptions and guide them to see the bigger picture. This guidance can help children develop important critical abilities, such as emotional regulation, impulse control, self efficacy, and establish emotional resilience.

Outcomes
- Improved self esteem
- Decreased stress and anxiety
- Decreased depression
- Increased persistence, particularly for challenging tasks
- Improved problem solving skills

How you do it:

**STEP 1: Prepare worksheets**

Worksheets involving images and colour may be a useful way to present information to younger children. Practitioners should consider tailoring age appropriate information to children that will engage and appeal to children, particularly younger aged children. Worksheets can be found in workbooks developed specifically for children. Wherever possible, they should be adapted to suit the child’s particular needs and to suit their interests. See also ‘Further resources’ section, page 17, for additional information.

**STEP 2: Provide rationale to both parent and child**

The goal is not to make negative thoughts stop, but rather to change the child’s relationship to them by thinking more critically. One metaphor for this is encouraging the child to become interested in the machinery of his or her brain; by seeing the wiring of the brain and understanding how it works; he can begin to free himself from negative thinking traps. Another metaphor is to turn the child into a ‘Thoughts and Feelings Detective’, who challenges negative thoughts by acting as a detective and examining the evidence.

For example, you might say something like: “Worried thoughts can often be changed to calm thoughts by being a ‘good detective’ and looking for realistic evidence for whether or not that thought is helpful or realistic.”
STEP 3: Teach children to identify negative thinking

Have parents help their child acknowledge that some thoughts are unhelpful and can lead to feelings such as worry, anger and sadness.

A good place for parents and children to start listening for these styles of thinking is by noticing words expressing extremes, such as nothing, everything, always and never. When children start replacing these words with more measured terms like sometimes or some things, they can begin to express more flexible and accurate thinking.

**For example:**

“We know that some thoughts are unhelpful. But there are some things you can do to beat these thoughts that make you feel bad. The first step is to catch them. We have already written down some of the worried thoughts that leave you feeling bad. Let’s have a look at them now.”

STEP 4: Gather evidence for the worried thought

Instruct the child that they need to play the role of ‘Thoughts and Feelings Detective’. The idea is that they search for clues to see whether or not they can really ‘know’ the feared outcome they have imagined.

**For example:**

“Let’s pretend that we are detectives and look for the evidence to see if [the worried or negative thought] will really [or always] happen.”

Some questions to ask the child to generate alternative evidence for their negative thoughts and worries include:

- What has happened before in this situation? “Have you been in a situation like this before? Did anything bad happen then?”
- What else could happen in this situation? “Can you think of any other reasons for this happening? Are there any other explanations for how that other person reacted?”
- What has happened to other people? “Have you had a friend in a similar situation? What did he or she do? If you could give advice to this friend, what would you tell them to do?”
- How will this look in two weeks, a month, a years’ time?

STEP 5: Have the child re-evaluate the worried thought

Note that this step is more about realistic thinking, not positive thinking. The aim is that based on re-evaluating the facts gathered about the situation, the child will be able to realise that the worried thought is not very likely, and that a calm (more neutral) thought is more likely.

For example, you could say something like:

“Now that you have gathered all the evidence together like a detective, you need to decide if your clues tell you if this thing might really happen? Can you think of a different calm thought that might be more likely?”

STEP 6: Problem solve

Once children have calmed down, they are ready to work on solving the problem that triggered the negative thoughts and feelings. Parents should be encouraged to refrain from ‘jumping in’ at this stage and attempting to solve the problem for the child. Rather they can ask children key questions to help generate more flexible thinking and work towards a solution to the problem at hand.

Key questions to identify the problem behind a negative thought/feeling:

- What happened there?
- What is upsetting you the most?
- When did you start to feel that way?
- Is your mind magnifying the good? How? Is your mind minimising the bad? How?

See Guide 3: Increasing coping and self regulation—Problem solving (child) for a full list of problem solving steps.
Helpful hints and tips

- These strategies are suited to managing excessive or unrealistic anxieties, rather than fears based on real difficulties. For example, if a child’s worries were focused on actual physical bullying at school, this approach would not be suited to those specific concerns.

- It is important not to teach the child that a worried thought is silly or unlikely. Rather, the aim is to encourage the child to rely on the evidence (gathered on their own accord as the ‘Thought Detective’).

- For younger children, you may choose to replace the ‘thinking detective’ with a superhero example, Harry Potter, Hermione, Scooby Doo or Spiderman.

Further resources

Photocopiable workbook for encouraging wellbeing in young people aged nine to 14 years. It offers a 10-session format for running a group, with notes for facilitators and home worksheets on various topics for participants to complete. The session activities are mixed – writing, discussion, games, role-play, puppet work etc. – and include many that could be adapted for a single client by counsellors new to cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) techniques.

A thorough, cognitive-behavioural workbook for those wanting to use CBT with young clients including a companion volume for clinicians.
Strategies to challenge negative thinking traps

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WHO</th>
<th>WHERE</th>
<th>HOW</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Caregiver; school-aged child</td>
<td>Agency, home setting</td>
<td>Practitioner led, one-on-one</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thinking traps cause us to draw conclusions based on inadequate information and, thus, reduce our accuracy and flexibility. Given that accuracy and flexibility are central to resilience, caregivers should be encouraged to buffer children and adolescents from disappointment, failure and frustration by helping them become aware of their child’s red flags for unhelpful and negative thinking traps. The following provides some key strategies that caregivers can use to help children replace these styles of thinking with more rational thinking styles.

**Outcomes**
- Decreased stress and anxiety
- Decreased depression
- Strengthened emotional resilience
- Improved self esteem
- Increased persistence, particularly for challenging tasks
- Improved problem solving skills.

**How you do it:**

**Model for positive thinking**

When parents use accurate and flexible thinking to assess our daily stresses and challenges, we role model a resilient view which children can imitate and eventually make their own. Show your children how you manage challenging situations by talking through problems aloud, and address them in an optimistic manner.

For example, instead of saying: “I’m hopeless with technical stuff. I just can’t work out how to get this computer to work!” A parent might be encouraged to model positive, problem-focused thinking by saying something like: “I’m having some real trouble setting up this program on the computer. I might go online and see if anyone else has had the same problem. Maybe there will be some answers there to help me work it out.”

Although this strategy may not relate to an instant change in children’s behaviours, by being regularly exposed to these strategies, over time children will learn to think positively and adopt similar problem solving approaches in their own lives.
### Teaching children strategies to challenge mental thinking traps

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NEGATIVE THINKING ERROR</th>
<th>STRATEGY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>ALL OR NOTHING THINKING (Removing the ‘Negative Glasses’)</strong></td>
<td>Parents should be encouraged to listen out for words such as always, never, nothing and everything and then encourage children to see the issue along more of a continuum by replacing these with words like: some things, or sometimes.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Relates to children who tend to see things in ‘black or white’ terms, with no middle ground. | *Sometimes salt-shaker exercise*  
A strategy to help young children do this is to draw their own ‘sometimes’ salt shaker. When a child is telling a caregiver that things are “always” bad or “never” good, caregivers can ask the child to give the sometimes shaker a good shake on the situation.  
**For example:**  
“I always muck up kicking the ball at soccer” → Encourage the child to use the ‘sometimes salt shaker’ “Sometimes I do well at soccer” |
| **OVERGENERALISING (Disaster thinking)**                                      | dome-technique  
Parents can be encouraged to gently challenge this perspective by asking children to look for the gaps. Rather than seeing one domino knocking down all other dominos in the child’s life, a parent should encourage the child to get specific about what has happened.  
For example, a parent might ask:  
“How many dominos are knocked down? One or all of them? Let’s look at the times Sarah didn’t sit next to you. Has that happened every day or just yesterday? Who else did you sit next to and talk to in class today? So when Sarah doesn’t sit next to you on one day, it doesn’t mean you have no friends or are never going to have friends.” |
| Overgeneralising involves the tendency to think that when one thing has gone wrong, everything in the child’s life will be negatively affected in a domino like way. An example might be a child whose friend does not sit next to her in class one day. The child thinks: “She didn’t sit next to me which means she probably won’t play with me at lunchtime today, and that means no one likes me – in fact I have no friends at all.” | Domino-technique  
Parents can be encouraged to gently challenge this perspective by asking children to look for the gaps. Rather than seeing one domino knocking down all other dominos in the child’s life, a parent should encourage the child to get specific about what has happened.  
For example, a parent might ask:  
“How many dominos are knocked down? One or all of them? Let’s look at the times Sarah didn’t sit next to you. Has that happened every day or just yesterday? Who else did you sit next to and talk to in class today? So when Sarah doesn’t sit next to you on one day, it doesn’t mean you have no friends or are never going to have friends.” |
| **PERSONALISING (Playing the blame game)**                                   | blamed-game  
An activity to help a child assess their involvement in a situation is called the “Blame Pie.” Help the child draw a pie and colour in the amount of pie they assume responsibility for. Caregivers can then encourage children to examine their ‘pie’ and see that there is ‘always more than one piece of the pie’. They might use different colours to shade in other people or factors that are involved in the situation to give a more realistic perspective.  
Children can be encouraged to see that they cannot fix what is not their part of the problem. Caregivers can then use problem solving strategies to help a child address their “piece of the pie” and gain a sense of mastery over the situation.  
**Thoughts such as these can lead to feeling discouraged, guilty and hopeless about themselves, or anger towards the person they blame.** | Blame-pie game  
An activity to help a child assess their involvement in a situation is called the “Blame Pie.” Help the child draw a pie and colour in the amount of pie they assume responsibility for. Caregivers can then encourage children to examine their ‘pie’ and see that there is ‘always more than one piece of the pie’. They might use different colours to shade in other people or factors that are involved in the situation to give a more realistic perspective.  
Children can be encouraged to see that they cannot fix what is not their part of the problem. Caregivers can then use problem solving strategies to help a child address their “piece of the pie” and gain a sense of mastery over the situation.  
**Thoughts such as these can lead to feeling discouraged, guilty and hopeless about themselves, or anger towards the person they blame.** |
Teaching children strategies to challenge mental thinking traps

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NEGATIVE THINKING ERROR</th>
<th>STRATEGY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>CATASTROPHISING (Defusing the ‘mental bomb’)</strong></td>
<td>Encourage the child and caregiver to ‘defuse’ the mental bomb (catastrophic thinking) by challenging their pervasive explanation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catastrophic thinking involves imagining catastrophic outcomes and extreme fears about what the consequences of the event could be, which results in high levels of anxiety in the child. Practitioners can begin by teaching the parent and child what happens when they tend to use catastrophic thinking. For example: “This type of thinking can mean that the tricky experience ‘explodes’ into every other aspect of life and things become bigger, scarier and harder to face. We usually know we are thinking this way when we hear words like Never, Always, Everyone and when we are feeling really worried about how something in the future might turn out.”</td>
<td>For example: <strong>Trunk-Tree-Branch exercise</strong> A good way to illustrate how to do this is a game called ‘Trunk-Tree-Branch’. Draw or have the child draw a picture of a tree and label the parts. Relate the tree to a recent perceived failure by the child, for example, getting a lower grade on a spelling test than expected. Show the child the drawing and ask: “How much of the tree is damaged by the mark you got on your test? Is it the whole trunk? Does it mean we need to cut the tree down? Is it the branch? Or is it maybe just one leaf that has been affected? The leaf is one of the many opportunities, some of which will work out and some won’t. But when one falls off, it means the tree still stays strong”. Whenever the child begins to talk with catastrophic thinking, refer back to the tree metaphor. Perhaps use humour such as: “Uh oh, does this mean we need to get out the chainsaw and cut down the tree? Is it a branch that’s the problem or just a leaf?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use perspective taking This point can be reinforced by asking the child if it is logical to conclude that a footy player should leave the team because they missed one ‘mark’, or if a teacher is a bad teacher because one of her classes was boring.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>**JUMPING TO CONCLUSIONS (The Mind Reader/ Fortune Teller) Children often personalise adversity. For example, when a teacher doesn’t smile at the child: “He is mad at me. He hates me.” The real reason may be that the teacher is feeling grumpy and tired because he didn’t get a good nights’ sleep the night before. Children need to differentiate between problems that are about them and those that are instead due to other people or circumstances.</td>
<td>Assist children to examine the facts surrounding the situation by becoming a ‘Thoughts and Feelings Detective.’ Although his initial thought is based on a feeling “My teacher doesn’t like me,” he can be encouraged to look deeper at second thoughts, based on facts. <strong>Questions to encourage a child to examine facts include:</strong> • Why did this situation not work out the way I had hoped? • What part might I have played in this situation? • What parts may be about someone else? • Would it have worked out for everyone this way? <strong>Changing shoes activity</strong> Invite the child to ‘step into the shoes’ and imagine the voice and the words of the other person. Refocusing the child’s view can help to increase the accuracy of his perception of the other person’s reactions.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Teaching children strategies to challenge mental thinking traps

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NEGATIVE THINKING ERROR</th>
<th>STRATEGY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>MAGINIFICATION AND MINIMISATION (The rubbish bin)</strong></td>
<td>Parents should be encouraged to help the child see the ways that their thinking might cancel out certain important details. For example, a child might say: “This has been the worst day of my life! I have to go to bed now and not one nice thing has happened all day!”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children, like adults, have the tendency to distort small negative events into insurmountable problems, or, shrink the importance of their accomplishments to make them appear trivial.</td>
<td>A parent might say: “Yes it was a hard day, but it wasn’t all terrible. I remember you and Sarah had fun playing soccer after school, and you were in a good mood when you woke up. Let’s think of something we can do tomorrow to make it a good day.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Visual activity</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Another visual activity for a younger child is to help them draw out their day or the problem. For example, for a child who missed scoring in a soccer game, she could be encouraged to draw a picture of herself and then be asked to circle which part of herself made that mistake. If the child colours in the entire picture as representative of her role (which may happen) parents might explain that this is the way the child <em>feels</em>. The parent might then encourage her to do a second drawing of herself and then colour in the section as the parent sees it (for example, the mistake as a freckle on her arm). The parent can then point out that unlike freckles, feelings associated with mistakes will fade over time.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>EMOTIONAL REASONING (Feelings are fact thinking)</strong></td>
<td>The central action caregivers can take to challenge emotional reasoning is to reinforce the message to children that just feeling that way does not make the feeling true. Although parents might be tempted to say: “Don’t say that” or “That isn’t true,” they should instead be encouraged to empathise with the child about how they are feeling, and then help them separate their feelings to gain perspective on the situation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional reasoning involves assuming that one’s negative emotions necessarily reflect the way things really are (e.g. “Because I feel it, it must be true.” “I feel stupid, therefore I am stupid”).</td>
<td>For example: “I know you feel really bad about that mark on the maths test. That’s how people feel when they like to do well at things like school work. But getting a lower mark than you expected on your test doesn’t turn you into a stupid person. I know this is bad feeling but it will pass.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Teaching children strategies to challenge mental thinking traps

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NEGATIVE THINKING ERROR</th>
<th>STRATEGY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>SHOULD STATEMENTS (Rigid rules)</strong></td>
<td>Parents can gently challenge these statements by validating their child’s feelings, and then help the child gain perspective and encourage flexible thinking about the problem at hand.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These statements relate to having a precise, fixed idea of how oneself or others should behave, and overestimating how bad it is when these expectations are not met. Rigid rules for living tend to be defined by “if...then” statements, “shoulds” or “musts” For example, “If I show people I am scared, they will always make fun of me;” or perfectionist ideas such as: “I must do well in school in every subject”.

For example, for a child who displays perfectionist traits and who insists they “must always do well at netball”, a parent might validate their feeling by saying: “I know you feel this way Sarah because you take pride in how you play. I know I often feel like I need to do really good work for my boss all the time. But there are going to be times when I have ‘off’ days, just like you might. Let’s think about your favourite netball player in the Opals. What would you say if she had a difficult night and didn’t play her best? Should she always be the best in the team?”

[Perspective taking] “Let’s think about how other factors play a part in how well you played on day?” e.g. injury/feeling tired/ playing in a new position [Blame-pie exercise]. “Let’s get specific; what things could we do when you are having a tough game?”

[Problem solve the issue].

---

**Helpful hints and tips:**

- **These strategies are suited to managing excessive or unrealistic anxieties, rather than fears based on real difficulties.** For example, if a child’s worries were focused on actual physical bullying at school, this approach would not be suited to those specific concerns.

- **It is important not to teach the child that a worried thought is silly or unlikely.** Rather, the aim is to encourage the child to rely on the evidence (gathered on their own accord as the ‘Thought Detective’).

- **For younger children, have them choose a superhero as a favourite detective and use this as a prompt.** For example, Harry Potter, Hermione, Scooby Doo or Spiderman.

References


To find out more information about our services, go to www.benevolent.org.au

**National Office**  
Level 1, 188 Oxford Street  
Paddington NSW 2021  
PO Box 171  
Paddington NSW 2021  
T 02 8262 3400  
F 02 9360 2319  
Donations 1800 819 633  
www.benevolent.org.au  
or find us on [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com) [Twitter](https://twitter.com)

**Queensland**  
9 Wilson Street  
West End QLD 4101  
PO Box 5347  
West End QLD 4101  
T 07 3170 4600  
F 07 3255 2953