DESSA

Comprehensive SEL System

APERTURE EDUCATION

STRATEGIES GUIDE:

Optimistic Thinking

-2020-

Optimistic Thinking

A child's attitude of confidence, hopefulness, and positive thinking regarding themselves and their life situations in the past, present, and future.

What is Optimistic Thinking?

Optimistic Thinking refers to a child's attitude of confidence, hopefulness, and positive thinking regarding herself/himself and her/his life situations in the past, present, and future. Children who demonstrate Optimistic Thinking will speak positively about themselves and those around them, will look forward to future events and activities, and will believe in themselves and their ability to achieve their future plans and goals. For example, consider a student who receives a bad grade on a math test. Optimistic Thinking would help the student to consider the bad grade as an indication they did not understand the specific content on that test (rather than interpreting it as being bad at math generally) and that they can improve their performance on the next math test by studying more and seeking help from their teacher. The student will continue to believe in their abilities and will have confidence that they can achieve a better grade next time.

The importance of having a sense of optimism and hope for the future is well established in the resilience literature as a key protective factor for individuals of all ages (Masten, 2014). Although it is not one of the five core social and emotional competencies developed by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), optimism is recognized by CASEL as an important part of Self-Awareness, defined as "The ability to accurately recognize one's emotions and thoughts and their influence on behavior. This includes accurately assessing one's strengths and limitations and possessing a well-grounded sense of confidence and optimism." (CASEL, 2012, p. 9). Given that the work of the Devereux Center for Resilient Children (DCRC; original developer of the DESSA) is grounded in resilience theory, Optimistic Thinking was chosen as its own unique construct that should be observed and developed in children and youth.

The DESSA for grades kindergarten through 8 (DESSA K-8) and DESSA-High School Edition for grades 9-12 (DESSA-HSE) measure Optimistic Thinking with the following items.

DESSA K-8	DESSA-HSE
2. carry herself/himself with confidence?	4. speak about positive things?
5. say good things about herself/himself?	5. look forward to classes or activities at school?
7. speak about positive things?	9. say good things about his/her classmates?
10. look forward to classes or activities at school?	20. express high expectations for himself/herself?
16. say good things about his/her classmates?	
30. say good things about the future?	
36. express high expectations for himself/herself?	

We have identified three aspects of Optimistic Thinking as defined by the DESSA. Items 2, 5, and 36 (DESSA K-8) and item 20 (DESSA-HSE) indicate *confidence in yourself*, items 10 and 30 (DESSA K-8) and item 5 (DESSA-HSE) indicate *hopefulness for the future*, and items 7 and 16 (DESSA K-8) and items 4 and 9 (DESSA-HSE) indicate *positive thinking regarding your life situations*.

The Different Aspects of Optimistic Thinking

As you use the Optimistic Thinking strategies, you'll notice that they may focus on one or more aspects of the competency. As mentioned above, we have identified three aspects of Optimistic Thinking: *confidence in yourself*, *hopefulness for the future*, and *positive thinking regarding your life situations*.

CONFIDENCE IN YOURSELF

An important aspect of Optimistic Thinking is having an attitude of *confidence in yourself*. Children may demonstrate this aspect by saying good things about themselves and their abilities. They may express high expectations for themselves and believe in their ability to achieve those expectations. Children displaying confidence will also perceive themselves as capable and able to handle the challenges or obstacles they may face now and in the future. A sense of confidence may help children take on new or challenging experiences and may also help children view setbacks or mistakes as lessons to be learned and not a reflection of their general abilities. However, it is important to note that this aspect is meant to reflect a balanced and realistic sense of confidence in oneself and one's abilities. Therefore, this aspect of Optimistic Thinking is closely aligned with the DESSA construct of Self-Awareness, which refers to a child's realistic understanding of their strengths and limitations.

HOPEFULNESS FOR THE FUTURE

The second aspect of Optimistic Thinking is having *hopefulness for the future*. Children may demonstrate this aspect by looking forward to events or activities in their lives and expressing a belief that good things will happen to them in the future. They will also set positive expectations and goals for themselves in looking towards their future, begin taking the necessary steps to reach those goals, and will express a belief that they can achieve important goals in their lives (Ciarrochi, Parker, Kashdan, Heaven, & Barkus, 2015; Snyder et al., 1991). This aspect of Optimistic Thinking is closely related to the DESSA construct of Goal-Directed Behavior, in that hope can help to energize behavior towards a desired goal or positive future outcome (Schmid et al., 2011). Hopefulness for the future is also closely related to the construct of optimism, with optimism broadly reflecting an expectation or belief that good things are likely to occur in the future (Scheier & Carver, 1985), and with hope reflecting a belief in *your ability* to meet your goals or expectations in the future (Heaven & Ciarrochi, 2008). Although the scientific literature distinguishes hope from optimism, both facets are reflected within the larger construct of Optimistic Thinking.

POSITIVE THINKING REGARDING YOUR LIFE SITUATIONS

A third aspect of Optimistic Thinking reflects *positive thinking regarding life situations* in the past, present, and future. Children demonstrating this aspect will speak about positive things. They will also say good things about those around them including their peers, siblings, and adults in their lives, as well as activities or events in their lives such as school or extracurricular activities. When encountering a bad or difficult event in their life, they will acknowledge the event, but view it in a constructive manner (Forgeard & Seligman, 2012). They will remain positive and cope effectively by seeking a solution and working to overcome the obstacle faced (Solberg Nes & Segerstrom, 2006). Again, this aspect shares some commonalities with the general construct of optimism.

The Development and Importance of Optimistic Thinking

Adults can support the development of Optimistic Thinking in a variety of ways. First, parents and teachers can help children become aware of their positive attributes and strengths (such as being helpful to others or being creative) and reinforce those characteristics when observed at home or school (Froh & Bono, 2014). Strengths can be identified from a variety of sources, including

observing a child's talents, abilities, or interests, or by noting DESSA items within the Strength or Typical range. Adults can encourage children to use these strengths each day and to draw on them when facing challenges (Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009). An understanding of a child's strengths can also be built into instruction by asking children to write about or deliver a speech about a unique strength, ability, or talent they have (Seligman et al., 2009). By recognizing and encouraging their positive attributes, children can strengthen their self-confidence and accurate beliefs in themselves.

In addition to promoting children's positive and optimistic views about themselves, adults can also encourage children to notice and appreciate the strengths of others and the positive events in their lives. For example, adults can create opportunities for children to notice and share instances when they observe positive attributes or contributions made by their peers throughout the school day (e.g., when they observe a classmate share their lunch with another child who forgot their lunch). Similarly, teachers can set aside a specific time (such as the beginning or end of the school day) for children to give one another compliments or report their observations of positive contributions they or their classmates made (Domitrovich, Cortes, & Greenberg, 2007; Seligman et al., 2009). This can also be incorporated into instructional time by encouraging children to notice the positive attributes demonstrated by characters in the books or novels they are reading in class or by assigning a writing prompt related to recognizing and appreciating the strengths of others (Seligman et al., 2009).

Adults can also support the development of Optimistic Thinking by cultivating an appreciation or gratitude for events and experiences that happen throughout a child's day. Studies have shown that asking children to reflect on three to five things in their lives they are grateful for (i.e., keeping a gratitude journal) can result in increased gratitude, enhanced well-being, fewer negative emotions, more optimism, more satisfaction with life, and more satisfaction with their school experience (Froh, Sefick, & Emmons, 2008). Other strategies for fostering gratitude and positivity in children may include setting aside time to reflect on and share the good things that happened that day or writing and hand-delivering a gratitude letter to an individual who has provided help but who was never fully thanked (Froh, Kashden, Ozimkowski, & Miller, 2009; Seligman et al., 2009). Adults can also express and model their own appreciation for positive events and interactions, which will bring awareness to and reinforce positive thinking for children (Froh & Bono, 2014). Not only can these practices result in a more positive and supportive classroom environment, but they may also help children feel more connected to and satisfied with their school experiences, which in turn can lead children to look

forward to school and feel more positive about their experiences in school and their learning (Froh et al., 2008).

In addition to encouraging children to notice and appreciate the good things in their lives, adults can also support Optimistic Thinking by helping to foster a belief that skills, abilities, and intelligence can be developed through continued effort and learning, which is often referred to as a growth mindset (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). Dweck and colleagues have found that children with a growth mindset tend to show more motivation for their learning, are more likely to take on challenging tasks, believe that their hard work and effort can lead to success, and will view setbacks as opportunities for learning new strategies or approaches (Dweck, 2007; Hong, Chiu, Dweck, Lin, & Wan, 1999). These children tend to outperform students who view their abilities and intelligence as being innate and unchangeable (Blackwell, Trzesniewski, & Dweck, 2007), which is referred to as a fixed mindset. Children with a fixed mindset tend to demonstrate less motivation for learning and believe that mistakes or setbacks reflect their inability or inadequacy. Consequently, when faced with situations in which they must exert additional effort, they are more likely to give up and lose confidence in themselves and their abilities.

Adults can foster a growth mindset by providing children with specific praise related to their efforts and learning process, which could include the strategies they use, persistence they show, good choices they make, or their hard work (Dweck, 2007; Mueller & Dweck, 1998). This type of praise leads children to maintain their motivation and confidence as well as their drive and enjoyment for learning, which ultimately contributes to better performance (Dweck, 2007). For example, rather than saying a general "Good work!" to a child, praise such as "I like how you really stick to your work, even when things are hard! Let's talk about the ways you've tried to solve this problem, and what you can try next" will more effectively promote a growth mindset. Importantly as pointed out by Dweck (2015), promoting a growth mindset isn't only about praising efforts. Children may be working hard, but if they are using the wrong approaches or strategies, they may not be learning. Therefore, as part of promoting a growth mindset, adults should also help students build their repertoire of learning strategies they can use throughout their lives (Dweck, 2015). By helping children to believe in their abilities to learn and enhance their skillset and helping them develop strategies they can effectively use to confirm those beliefs, adults are fostering children's Optimistic Thinking.

Another key facet to the promotion of Optimistic Thinking is cultivating the development of children's optimism. Within the research literature, optimism has been conceptualized in two main ways: optimistic explanatory style (Seligman, 1991) and dispositional optimism (Scheier & Carver, 1992). According to Seligman and colleagues, optimism is a reflection of how an individual explains positive and negative events in their lives. Individuals with an optimistic explanatory style acknowledge the existence of bad events but view them constructively (Forgeard & Seligman, 2012). Compared to pessimistic individuals, those with an optimistic explanatory style will consider bad events to be temporary (vs. long-lasting), specific to a given area (vs. impacting their entire life), and will believe in their ability to overcome the negative event (vs. viewing the event as their fault and out of their control) (Seligman, 1991). In contrast to this view of optimism (based on how events are interpreted or explained), Scheier & Carver (1992) conceptualize optimism as a general expectation of whether good or bad events are likely to happen in the future. This approach, referred to as dispositional optimism, frames optimism in terms of goal pursuit. When faced with a challenge or a bad event, optimistic individuals believe they can attain their goals and continue their efforts; while pessimistic individuals tend to doubt their abilities and end up giving up their pursuit of a goal. Although these two views of optimism are theoretically distinct from one another (Carver, Scheier, & Segerstrom, 2010), each suggest similar strategies for building children's optimism (Forgeard & Seligman, 2012).

Strategies that cultivate optimism have been derived from cognitive-behavioral therapy approaches which generally attempt to change negative thinking patterns into being more realistic and hopeful (Carver et al., 2010; Gillham & Reivich, 2004). For example, an approach referred to as the ABC model (Ellis, 1962) may be useful in helping children and adults think about the bad events or difficulties they encounter in ways that are more positive, flexible, and realistic (Seligman et al., 2009). According to the ABC model, an activating event (A) will trigger thoughts and beliefs about the event (B), which will lead to a resulting emotional and/or behavioral response or consequence (C). For example, a student might not do well on a test (A), attribute their poor performance to "not being smart enough" (B), and as a result will feel sad (C). The key to this approach is helping children understand that their thoughts about an event lead to their subsequent feelings (Seligman, 1991). Children are encouraged to think about a variety of realistic thoughts and beliefs they might have following a negative event, and then also consider how those thoughts may lead to different feelings and behaviors. For example, alternative explanations for doing poorly on a test may include "I didn't

spend enough time studying for this test" or "This test was much harder than previous tests in this class". Although these thoughts may still result in feeling sad, they may also lead to a more constructive behavioral response of studying harder for the next test. Therefore, rather than simply encouraging children to be more optimistic, this approach teaches children how to develop more optimistic explanations for events in their lives (Gillham & Reivich, 2004). Importantly, research has shown that our habitual way of explaining events (either our optimistic or pessimistic explanatory style) is typically developed in childhood (Seligman, 1991) and is influenced by how adults talk about, explain, and react to events both in children's lives, and in their own lives (Gillham & Reivich, 2004). Children are likely to pick up on adults' responses to negative events, and over time, these responses can instill a way of thinking about their own lives (either optimistic or pessimistic). Therefore, modeling optimistic explanations and intentionally helping children to develop more constructive ways of thinking about events in their lives is critical to supporting their Optimistic Thinking skills.

Finally, the development of Optimistic Thinking is also influenced by the child's environment. In the home, parents who are warm and caring, yet provide firm and responsive expectations will help children feel secure, support their autonomy, and encourage them to take risks and gain competence in a variety of areas, in turn supporting the development of their confidence, hope, and optimism (Froh & Bono, 2014; Gillham & Reivich, 2004; Heaven & Ciarrochi, 2008). Similarly, in the classroom or out-of-school time program, adults can create a safe environment that encourages realistic risk-taking and provides children with opportunities and guidance to succeed on challenging tasks that are within their range of competence, often referred to as the "zone of proximal development" (Vigotsky, 1978). This will offer opportunities to learn from mistakes and foster positive and accurate beliefs in themselves and in their ability to take on future challenges (Gillham & Reivich, 2004; Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002).

The Benefits of Optimistic Thinking

As children develop and use the skills of Optimistic Thinking in their lives, they may experience a variety of positive benefits in the home, in their school or out-of-school time program, and in the future.

IN THE HOME

Children demonstrating Optimistic Thinking skills will likely contribute to a more positive home environment. For both children and adolescents, optimism and hope have been linked to increased happiness, positive affect, and lower depressive symptoms (Ciarrochi et al., 2015; Thomson, Schonert-Reichl, & Oberle, 2015). Excitement for school or upcoming activities may be common, and children may speak positively about the people and events in their lives, leading to family conversations that are joyful and positive. For older children entering adolescence, a period often characterized by rapid shifts in emotions and feelings of disconnect from family members, Optimistic Thinking may help to mitigate these negative feelings and promote a calmer home life (Froh et al., 2008).

Optimism and hope for the future have also been shown to lead to more participation in extracurricular activities as well as better engagement and achievement in school (Ciarrochi, Heaven, & Davies, 2007; Gilman, Dooley, & Florell, 2006), which may help to reduce potential conflicts between parents and children at home. For example, younger children may be more willing to do their homework if they see the benefit it has on their future. Similarly, older youth may be more planful about their future, take on advanced courses or a part-time job, and join school clubs or sports teams. Children with a positive view of their future selves will be more likely to take action to meet their goals (Snyder et al., 1991), which in turn may reduce conflict and positively influence interactions at home.

IN THE SCHOOL OR OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME PROGRAM

Optimistic Thinking skills provide numerous benefits to children and their educators in classroom or out-of-school time program settings. High levels of hope and optimism in children and adolescents have been linked to increased positive affect and decreased externalizing and internalizing behaviors (Ciarrochi et al., 2015; Valle, Huebner, & Suldo, 2006). Similarly, the presence of more optimistic beliefs has been associated with better coping mechanisms during stressful events (Ciarrochi et al., 2007; Valle et al., 2006), greater peer acceptance (Oberle, Schonert-Reichl, & Thomson, 2010), and a greater sense of life satisfaction (Oberle, Schonert-Reichl, & Zumbo, 2011). Taken together, these factors may contribute to a more positive school or program environment.

The importance of hope and positive thinking regarding the future also appears to play a vital role in school success. Students demonstrating the skills and mindsets related to Optimistic Thinking are more likely to participate in extracurricular activities (Gilman et al., 2006), show high achievement motivation (Schulman, 1995), and are more likely to plan for and explore potential careers (Creed, Patton, & Bartrum, 2002). It appears that Optimistic Thinking helps drive students to engage in more goal-directed behavior related to their future (both setting goals and striving to achieve them) (Snyder et al., 1991), which in turn is associated with many long-term benefits, such as better grades in school (Ciarrochi et al., 2007) and reduced likelihood of dropping out before completing high school (Worrell & Hale, 2001).

IN THE FUTURE

An increasingly large body of research suggests that the benefits of Optimistic Thinking continue into adulthood. Individuals who frequently think positively and experience positive moods are more likely to seek out and work towards new goals in their lives. When these goals are attained, their happiness is reinforced (Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005). Consequently, optimistic individuals report experiencing greater well-being and life satisfaction (Forgeard & Seligman, 2012), even in the face of stressful life events such as caring for a family member with cancer or Alzheimer's (Given et al., 1993; Shifren & Hooker, 1995), unsuccessful attempts at in vitro fertilization (Litt, Tennen, Affleck, & Klock, 1992), or facing treatment for serious health problems such as cancer or AIDS (Carver et al., 1993; Taylor et al., 1992). In part, this may be due to the higher likelihood of optimists utilizing active problem-solving strategies and effective coping mechanisms, such as the seeking out of additional information or resources following the diagnosis of disease (Solberg Nes and Segerstrom, 2006). This may also contribute to optimists experiencing better physical and psychological health (Scheier & Carver, 1985).

Optimistic Thinking also appears to influence later academic and career success. Having Optimistic Thinking skills is related to better academic performance in college and a greater likelihood of completing college (Solberg Nes, Evans, & Segerstrom, 2009). Post-college, these positive associations continue, with studies showing better work performance, more productivity, and higher salaries for individuals high in optimism and hope (Rand, Martin, & Shea, 2011; Segerstrom, 2007; Seligman & Schulman, 1986), a finding evident across a variety of professional settings (Forgeard &

Seligman, 2012). These professional successes may in part be due to the presence of Optimistic Thinking skills, which help to motivate individuals and energize behavior towards the pursuit of long-term goals and to ongoing persistence and efforts in reaching those goals, even as challenges arise (Carver & Scheier, 2014). Finally, individuals who report high levels of Optimistic Thinking report a greater sense of purpose and self-acceptance as well as greater satisfaction in their relationships (Scheier & Carver, 1992).

Promoting Optimistic Thinking is beneficial to children now and into the future. Adults can use their everyday interactions with children intentionally to help build and support a sense of optimism, hope, and positive thinking. The strategies in this guide are a starting point for developing and supporting children as they acquire and strengthen their Optimistic Thinking skills, which will ultimately impact their school and life success.

Optimistic Thinking Reflection Questions

We encourage you to explore this social-emotional competency in more depth by reflecting on the following questions:

- How do you see this competency providing opportunities for growth in your educational setting?
- What aspects of this competency would you like to learn more about?
- What do you see as the biggest challenges for building this competency in your students?

This guide does not represent a comprehensive literature review, but a foundation for exploring the strategies found in the DESSA Comprehensive SEL System. Please feel free to use the references below to further explore the construct of Optimistic Thinking.

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