

Chapter Seven

# Children and Parents: The Origins of Optimism

EXPLANATORY STYLE has a sweeping effect on the lives of adults. It can produce depression in response to everyday setbacks, or produce resilience even in the face of tragedy. It can numb a person to the pleasures of life, or allow him to live fully. It can prevent him from achieving his goals, or help him exceed them. As we will see, a person's explanatory style influences the way other people perceive him, disposing them to work against him or with him. And it affects physical health. Explanatory style develops in childhood. The optimism or pessimism developed then is fundamental. New setbacks and victories are filtered through it, and it becomes an entrenched habit of thinking. In this chapter we will ask what explanatory style's source is, what its consequences are for children, and how it can be changed.

## Test Your Child's Optimism

If your child is over seven, he has probably developed an explanatory style, which is in the process of crystallizing. You can measure your child's explanatory style with a test called the Children's Attributional Style Questionnaire, or CASQ, which has been taken by thousands of children. The CASQ is very much like the test you took in chapter three. It takes a child

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between the ages of eight and thirteen about twenty minutes to finish. If your child is older, give him the test from chapter three. For children under eight, there is no wholly reliable paper-and-pencil test, but there is another way of measuring their explanatory style, which I'll tell you about later in this chapter. To give your child the test, set aside twenty minutes, sit down at a table with him, and say something like:

"Different kids think in different ways. I've been reading a book about this, and I've been wondering how you think about some things that might happen to you.

"Look at this. It's really interesting. It asks you a bunch of questions about what you think. Each question is like a little story, and for each story, there are two ways you might react. You're supposed to choose one way or the other, the one that's closest to the way you'd really feel if that particular thing happened to you.

"So here's a pencil. I want you to give it a try. Imagine that each of these little stories happened to you, even if they never have. And then check either the 'A' answer or the 'B' answer-the one that best describes the way you would feel. But the great thing about this test is that there are no wrong answers! Isn't that terrific? Now, here, let's take a look at number one."

Once you get him going, your child can probably take it without any assistance. But for younger children who are not skilled readers, you should read each item aloud at the same time the child is reading it to himself.

CHILDREN'S ATTRIBUTIONAL STYLE QUESTIONNAIRE  
(CASQ)

1. You get an A on a test.

A. *I am smart.*

B. *I am good in the subject that the test was in.*

PvG

I

0

2. You play a game with some friends and you win.

A. *The people that I played with did not play the game well.*

B. *I play that game well.*

PsG

0

I

3. You spend a night at a friend's house and you have a good time.

A. *My friend was in a friendly mood that night.*  
 B. *Everyone in my friend's family was in a friendly mood that night.*

PVG

I

0

I

4. You go on a vacation with a group of people and you have fun.

A. *I was in a good mood.*  
 B. *The people I was with were in good moods.*

PsG

I

0

5. All of your friends catch a cold except you.

A. *I have been healthy lately.*  
 B. *I am a healthy person.*

PmG

0

I

6. Your pet gets run over by a car.

A. *I don't take good care of my pets.*  
 B. *Drivers are not cautious enough.*

PsB

I

0

f

7. Some kids you know say that they don't like you.

A. *Once in a while people are mean to me.*  
 B. *Once in a while I am mean to other people.*

PsB

0

I

8. You get very good grades.

A. *Schoolwork is simple.*  
 B. *I am a hard worker.*

PsG

0

I

9. You meet a friend and your friend tells you that you look nice.

A. *My friend felt like praising the way people looked that day.*  
 B. *Usually my friend praises the way people look.*

PmG

0

I

- io. A good friend tells you that he hates you.

A. *My friend was in a bad mood that day.*  
 B. *I wasn't nice to my friend that day.*

PSB

0

I

11. You tell a joke and no one laughs.

A. *I don't tell jokes well.*  
 B. *The joke is so well known that it is no longer funny.*

PsB

I

0

12. Your teacher gives a lesson and you don't understand it.

A. *I didn't pay attention to anything that day.*  
 B. *I didn't pay attention when my teacher was talking.*

PvB

I

0

13. You fail a test.

A. *My teacher makes hard tests.*  
 B. *The past few weeks, my teacher has made hard tests.*

PmB

I

0

14. You gain a lot of weight and start to look fat.

A. *The food I have to eat is fattening.*  
 B. *I like fattening foods.*

PsB

0

I

15. A person steals money from you.

A. *That person is dishonest.*  
 B. *People are dishonest.*

PvB

0

I

16. Your parents praise something you make.

A. *I am good at making some things.*  
 B. *My parents like some things I make.*

PsG

I

0

17. You play a game and you win money.

A. *I am a lucky person.*  
 B. *I am lucky when I play games.*

PvG

I

0

32. Your mother makes your favorite dinner for you. PvG
- A. *There are a few things that my mother does to please me.* o
- B. *My mother likes to please me.* I
33. A team that you are on loses a game. PmB
- A. *The team members don't play well together.* I
- B. *That day the team members didn't play well together.* o
34. You finish your homework quickly. PvG
- A. *Lately I have been doing everything quickly.* I
- B. *Lately I have been doing schoolwork quickly.* o
35. Your teacher asks you a question and you give the wrong answer. PmB
- A. *I get nervous when I have to answer questions.* I
- B. *That day I got nervous when I had to answer questions.* o
36. You get on the wrong bus and you get lost. PmB
- A. *That day I wasn't paying attention to what was going on.* o
- B. *I usually don't pay attention to what's going on.* I
37. You go to an amusement park and you have a good time. PvG
- A. *I usually enjoy myself at amusement parks.* o
- B. *I usually enjoy myself.* I
38. An older kid slaps you in the face. PsB
- A. *I teased his younger brother.* I
- B. *His younger brother told him I had teased him.* o
39. You get all the toys you want on your birthday. PmG
- A. *People always guess what toys to buy me for my birthday.* I
- B. *This birthday people guessed right as to what toys I wanted.* o

40. You take a vacation in the country and you have a wonderful time. PmG
- A. *The country is a beautiful place to be.* I
- B. *The time of the year that we went was beautiful.* o
41. Your neighbors ask you over for dinner. PmG
- A. *Sometimes people are in kind moods.* o
- B. *People are kind.* I
42. You have a substitute teacher and she likes you. PmG
- A. *I was well behaved during class that day.* o
- B. *I am almost always well behaved during class.* I
43. You make your friends happy. PmG
- A. *I am a fun person to be with.* I
- B. *Sometimes I am a fun person to be with.* o
44. You get a free ice-cream cone. PsG
- A. *I was friendly to the ice-cream man that day.* I
- B. *The ice-cream man was feeling friendly that day.* o
45. At your friend's party the magician asks you to help him out. PsG
- A. *It was just luck that I got picked.* o
- B. *I looked really interested in what was going on.* I
46. You try to convince a kid to go to the movies with you, but he won't go. PvB
- A. *That day he did not feel like doing anything.*
- B. *That day he did not feel like going to the movies.*

47. Your parents get a divorce.

A. *It is hard for people to get along well when they are married.*

B. *It is hard for my parents to get along well when they are married.*

PvB

1

0

48. You have been trying to get into a club and you don't get in.

A. *I don't get along well with other people.*

B. *I don't get along well with the people in the club.*

PvB

1

0

#### SCORING KEY

PmB

PmG

PvB

PvG

HoB

PsB

PSG

Total B

Total G

G-B

You can score the test now. You can share your child's scores with him if you like. If you do tell him what his scores are, also explain what they mean.

Start with the PmB (Permanent Bad) score. Total the numbers in the right-hand margin that follow the answers your child chose to questions 13, 18, 24, 28, 31, 33, 35, and 36. Enter that total in the scoring key above, next to "PmB."

Then add the PmG scores—questions 5, 9, 23, 39, 40, 41, 42, and 43 — and enter the total in the scoring key.

Then do the pervasiveness scores and note them in the key. The PvB questions are 12, 15, 20, 21, 27, 46, 47, and 48. The PvG questions are 1, 3, 17, 25, 30, 32, 34, and 37.

Total the PmB and PvB scores to get the hope (HoB) score. Record it.

Now score personalization. The PsB questions are 6, 7, 10, 11, 14, 26, 29, and 38.

The PsG questions are 2, 4, 8, 16, 19, 22, 44, and 45.

Compute the total scores for bad events (PmB + PvB + PsB) and record the Total B; then total the scores for good events (PmG + PvG + PSG) and record it.

Finally, compute the overall scale score, G-B, by subtracting the Total B from the Total G. Write it on the bottom line of the key.

Here's what your child's scores mean and how your child compares to the thousands of children who have taken this test.

First, girls and boys score differently. Girls, at least up to puberty, are noticeably more optimistic than boys. The average nine-to-twelve-year-old girl has a G - B score Of 7.0. The average nine-to-twelve-year-old boy has a score Of 5.0. If your girl scores less than 4.5, she is somewhat pessimistic. If she scores less than 2, she is very pessimistic and at risk for depression. If your boy scores less than 2.5, he is somewhat pessimistic; less than 1, he is very pessimistic and at risk for depression.

As for Total B score, the average nine-to-twelve-year-old girl's is 7.0, and the average boy's is 8.5. Scores of three points *higher* than the average are very pessimistic.

The average Total G score for nine-to-twelve-year-old girls and boys is 13.5. Scores three points lower are very pessimistic. The individual good dimensions (PmG, PsG, and PvG) each average about 4.5, with scores of 3 or below being very pessimistic. The individual bad dimensions (PmB, PvB, PSG) average about 2.5 for girls and 2.8 for boys, with scores Of 4 or *higher* being risk markers for depression.

## Why Children Can't Be Hopeless

YOU MAY HAVE been surprised about the norms and what the scores mean, particularly compared to your own scores. On the whole, prepubescent children are extremely optimistic, with a capacity for hope and an immunity to hopelessness they will never again possess after puberty, when they lose much of their optimism.

When my son, David, was five, my wife and I divorced. Explaining it to him in euphemisms did not seem to work. He kept asking me, every weekend, if Kerry and I would get married again. The time had come for straight talk. I told him at length that people fall out of love, and that it can be final. Trying to make the point, I asked him: "Did you ever have