

What to do when kids catastrophise

by Michael Grose

“If I don’t do well in this test my whole year will be messed up!”

Do you have a child who automatically assumes the worst case scenario in any risky or new situations? If so, you have a catastrophiser on your hands.

Catastrophisers exaggerate their worries and place enormous pressure on themselves.

The default mechanism in their thinking always goes to the most negative outcome possible. The results won’t just be bad, they’ll be catastrophic!

They won’t just mess up if they give a talk to their class at school. They’ll make total fools of themselves and the whole class will laugh at them, or so they say.

They won’t just fall over in a game. They’ll break a leg, end up in hospital and miss out on going to school camp, or so they say.

They won’t just get a dirty look from their teacher if they arrive late for school. They’ll be kept in at lunch-time, miss out on sport and have all the other kids making fun of them if they are late, or so they say.

Catastrophising makes kids feel miserable. Worse, they often don’t want to do anything because they expect the worst possible outcome.

So what to do with a catastrophiser?

Your approach will depend to some extent on your child’s age.

Under fives generally don’t overtly catastrophise, however even young children can be negative. Make sure you model upbeat, positive thinking as young children take their cues from their parents, particularly the parent they spend most time around.

Being a significant adult in the life of a child carries some responsibilities, and presenting the world as an exciting, positive place full of possibility is one of those responsibilities!!!

School-aged children need to be encouraged to keep things in perspective. Challenge your child’s propensity to catastrophise. Here are five ways you can use to challenge your child’s catastrophic thinking:

1. **“What’s the most likely scenario?”** Sometimes it’s useful to introduce a dose of old-fashioned rational thinking. “Yep, you could break your leg if you go skiing. But the odds are that you won’t.”
2. **“Does it really matter?”** **“You may be right, but is it the end of the world as we know it?”**

One way of dealing with hard core catastrophisers is to admit that they could be right, but even if they are right and the worst case scenario does happen, the sun will still shine tomorrow. Take kids to the worst possible scenario and they may see it's not so bad.

3. **“Where does this fit on the disaster meter?”** Catastrophisers get themselves in a knot about relatively insignificant things. Okay, making a fool out themselves may not be insignificant to kids, however compared to plenty of other events..... ..well, perspective is a good thing. Help them get some perspective by giving their worry a score out of ten, on how important the issue really is.
4. **“That’s unhelpful thinking.”** Sometimes kids’ thinking is so out of whack with reality that they become anxious about minor things. Thinking such as, *‘everyone must like me’*, *‘I must never make a mistake’* and *‘bad things always happen to me’* are extreme and need to be replaced by more moderate, realistic thoughts. E.g. *“It would be nice if everyone liked me but not everyone will. It’s important to have some good friends.”*
5. **Replace extreme words for feelings with more moderate descriptors:** Today’s kids talk in extremes – *‘awesome’*, *‘the best’* and *‘gross’* roll off their tongues easily these days. Extreme language leads to extreme thinking. So encourage kids to replace *“I’m furious”* with *“I’m annoyed”*, *“It’s a disaster”* with *‘It’s a pain’*, *“I can’t stand it”* with *“I don’t like it”*. Sounds minor but by changing kids’ language you change how they think about events and, more importantly, how they feel.

I suspect that many parents will identify strongly with some of the above.

Yep, we all catastrophise from time to time, particularly when we are under stress. It takes a cool customer to moderate their thinking the whole time. So be mindful of your child’s need to jump to the worst from time to time. A bit of reassurance is all that’s needed in these one-off scenarios.

But if you, like your child, are a serial catastrophiser, then it will be useful to challenge your unhelpful or extreme thinking when it happens. Not only will you model realistic thinking for your kids, but you will get an insight into what you need to do to change your child’s catastrophising.