

How thinking affects feelings

Understanding that what we think affects how we feel and how we behave helps children and adults learn effective ways of managing emotions. As shown in the following examples, unhelpful thoughts can lead us to feel bad about ourselves and can stop us from doing what we want to do. Helpful thoughts lead to more positive feelings and effective behaviours.

Ben thinks: *I'm so dumb – everyone is better at school than me.* Ben feels frustrated and hopeless, and he gives up on doing his homework (behaviour).

Sharni thinks: *I'm never going to make any friends at this new school.* Sharni feels worried and sad, and she refuses to go to school (behaviour).

Rachael thinks: *I wrote a good story in class yesterday.* Rachael feels proud and confident, which helps her to write the next story (behaviour).



How thinking affects feelings – continued

Some examples of unhelpful thinking and more helpful alternatives are listed in this table:

Kinds of unhelpful thinking to look out for	What a child might think or say	A helpful alternative
Overgeneralising	I failed this maths test – I am hopeless at EVERYTHING.	I may have failed this maths test but I'm good at other things.
Black or white thinking	I forgot to say my line. Now the whole play is ruined.	I made one mistake. It doesn't mean the whole thing is ruined.
'Shoulds' and 'musts'	They should have known not to start the game without me.	I would have liked them to wait for me, but I can still join in.
Personalising	It's my fault she got hurt. I should have warned her.	It was an accident. It's nobody's fault.
Magnification	This project is so huge I don't know where to start. I might as well give up.	I can manage this if I take it step by step.
Minimisation	Who cares if I won an award for 'most improved'? It doesn't mean anything.	I may not have got the best marks, but I've still done well.
Catastrophising	The other team looks so good. There's no way we can win.	It will be a tough match, but we can still try our hardest. We might do better than we think.



Challenging unhelpful thinking

Unhelpful thinking is very common in both children and adults. Often we don't notice it because the thoughts happen automatically. By listening to the things children say about themselves and their experiences, parents and carers can learn to notice and gently challenge children's unhelpful thinking. The best way to do this is to help children think through the reasons why they think a particular way. Saying things like, "I can see how you might think that, but maybe there's another way of looking at it," or "Let's see how we can check that out," are very useful for helping children change their unhelpful thinking. It can help children to know they are not wrong to have unhelpful thoughts (everybody has them), but that learning to identify and change unhelpful thinking is a way of managing their feelings better.

This resource is part of a range of KidsMatter Primary information sheets for families and school staff. View them all online at www.kidsmatter.edu.au



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