

Understanding Your Child's Thinking Errors: A Guide for Parents

Thinking errors, or cognitive distortions, are ways our minds convince us of things that aren't necessarily true. They can make us feel bad and can be particularly challenging for young children to recognize and address. Here's a guide to help parents understand some common thinking errors their children might experience and how to address them. By understanding these thinking errors, you can help your child recognize and change these patterns, leading to a healthier, more positive mindset. This will help your child build resilience and improve their overall well-being.

Ignoring the Positive

Children sometimes focus too much on the negative and overlook the positive aspects of their experiences.

Examples:

- Your child does well on most of their homework, but they only focus on the one question they got wrong.
- They win a prize at the science fair, but all they can think about is the one experiment that didn't work perfectly.

How to Help:

- Encourage them to celebrate their successes, no matter how small.
- Help them recognize and verbalize the positive aspects of their achievements

Making Mountains Out of Molehills

Children may make a big deal out of something small or make a slightly bad thing seem like the worst thing ever.

Examples:

- Your child accidentally drops their ice cream and thinks their whole day is ruined.
- “I spilled a little paint on my project. Now it’s completely ruined!”

How to Help:

- Teach them to put things in perspective and see the bigger picture.
- Show them that small mistakes or accidents are a normal part of life.

Predicting the Worst

Children might think they know what will happen in the future and assume it will be bad.

Examples:

- “If I try out for the school play, I know I’ll forget my lines and everyone will laugh at me.”
- “No one will want to sit with me at lunch tomorrow.”

How to Help:

- Encourage them to take positive risks and reassure them that outcomes can be good.
- Discuss past experiences where their fears did not come true.

Mind Reading

This error happens when children believe they know what someone else is thinking or why they are doing something, without enough information.

Examples:

- “My friend didn’t talk to me today. They must be mad at me.”
- “The teacher didn’t call on me in class. She probably thinks I’m not smart enough.”

How to Help:

- Teach them to ask questions and gather information before making assumptions.
- Encourage open communication with friends and teachers.

Negative Labeling

This occurs when children have a negative belief about themselves and think it applies to everything they do.

Examples:

- “I missed the ball in soccer practice, so I must be a terrible player.”
- “I couldn’t solve the math problem, so I must be bad at math.”

How to Help:

- Help them separate specific incidents from their overall self-worth.
- Encourage positive self-talk and affirmations.

Setting Unrealistic Standards

This error involves thinking that they must be perfect in everything they do, otherwise, they are not good enough.

Examples:

- “If I don’t get an A on every test, I’m not smart.”
- “I have to be the best in my class at every subject, or I’m a failure.”

How to Help:

- Teach them that it’s okay to make mistakes and that perfection is not always possible.
- Praise their efforts and improvements, not just the outcomes.

Self-Blaming

This is when children blame themselves for anything that goes wrong around them, even if it’s not their fault.

Examples:

- When their team loses the game, they think it’s entirely their fault.
- “Mom is upset today. I must have done something wrong.”

How to Help:

- Help them see the bigger picture and understand that many factors contribute to outcomes.
- Encourage them to talk about their feelings and understand the real reasons behind events.

Treating Feelings as Facts

This happens when children believe that if they feel something, it must be true.

Examples:

- “I feel like nobody likes me, so it must be true.”
- “I feel scared about the test, so I must be unprepared.”

How to Help:

- Teach them to differentiate between feelings and facts.
- Encourage them to look for evidence that supports or refutes their feelings.

"Should" Statements

These statements involve believing that things have to be a certain way.

Examples:

- “People should always be nice to me.”
- “I should never make mistakes in my drawings.”

How to Help:

- Teach them that “should” statements are unrealistic and can lead to disappointment.
- Encourage them to replace “should” with “it would be nice if” or “I’d like it if.”