Three main theories of depression:
1. Biomedical theory: says there are insufficient brain chemicals
2. Psychoanalytic theory: depression is anger directed at the self
3. Cognitive theory: depression comes from pessimistic, conscious thoughts:
   a. Founded by Dr. Aaron Beck in 1980s looked at how the symptoms of
depression were divided into four classes (low mood, listless behavior, physical
problems, and catastrophic thinking). He felt that catastrophic thinking was
more that just superficial symptom of depression, but was root cause of all
other symptoms of depression. The depressive’s habit of thinking the future is
bleak, the present unbearable, the past filled with defeat, and the self without
the ability to improve matters creates the low mood, lack of zest and somatic
symptoms of depression.

The Self Esteem Movement for Children:
- The way that parents, teachers and professionals go about bolstering children’s’ self-
esteem often erodes children’s sense of self-worth. By emphasizing how a child feels,
at the expense of what the child does – mastery, persistence, overcoming frustration
and boredom, and meeting challenge – parents and teachers are making this
generation of children more vulnerable to depression.
  - A poster picturing clapping hands says, “We applaud ourselves”
  - Fill in the blank games ask kids to complete, “I am special
because...” with such achievements as “I know how to color”
- The rationale for the puffery is “the basis for everything we do is self-esteem so if we
do something to give kids a stronger sense of themselves, they’ll be wiser in the
choices they make.

The History of Self-Esteem:
- William James, the father of modern psychology had a formula for it over 100 years
ago: Self esteem = Success
  Pretensions
- The more we achieve, according to James, the lower our expectations, the higher our
self-esteem. We can feel better about ourselves either by succeeding more or by
downsizing our hopes.
- Self esteem is a feeling state (mortification, contentment, satisfaction) but these
feelings are rooted in the world, in the success of our commerce with the world. The
tensions between these two aspects of self-esteem, feeling good vs. doing
well in the world, has been at the heart of the self-esteem movement ever
since. It shows what is right with self-esteem but also what is wrong with
trying to instill it by affirmations.
- Self-esteem lay dormant for many years as Americans fought wars and overcame
economic depression.
In 1967, Stanley Coopersmith, PhD from University of California at Davis, proposed that self-esteem was crucial for child-rearing. Self-Esteem was now seen as being comprised of two components:

- Confidence in our ability to think and to cope with the basic challenges of life (doing well)
- Confidence in our right to be happy, the feeling of being worth, deserving, entitled to assert our needs and wants and entitles to enjoy the fruits of our efforts (feeling good).

So widely accepted today is this kind of self-esteem that California has made it official. In “Toward a State of Esteem,” a set of recommendations made by a task force under the auspices of the California legislature, poor self-esteem is claimed to cause academic failure, drug use, dependence on welfare, and teenage pregnancy (among other things). Every school district in CA is urged to adopt the promotion of self-esteem and teach it to their children. The research literature shows just the opposite. Low self-esteem is a consequence of failing in school, of being on welfare, of being arrested – not the cause!

The problem here is that there is no effective technology for teaching feeling good which does not first teach doing well. Feelings of self-esteem in particular and happiness in general, develop as side effects – of mastering challenges, working successfully, overcoming frustration and boredom, and winning. The feeling of self-esteem is a byproduct of doing well.

Trying to achieve the feeling side of self-esteem directly, before achieving good commerce with the world, profoundly confuses the means and the end. Bolstering the feeling side of self-esteem without breaking the shackles of hopelessness and passivity accomplishes nothing!

What California, and every state needs is not children who are encouraged to feel good, but children who are taught the skills of doing well – how to study, how to avoid pregnancy, drugs, and gangs, and how to get off welfare.

The Epidemic of Depression

Depression until the 1960s was a fairly unusual condition, typically reported by middle-aged women. In the early 1960s it started to become more prevalent and is now the common cold of mental illness often taking its first victims in junior high school, or earlier (this is known from four large scale studies over the last 30 years)

One of the major findings of all this research is that people born after the feeling-good era and self-esteem movement had gotten under way are suffering from depression roughly 10 times the rate of people born in the first third of the century!!! Not only is severe depression much more common now, it also attacks its victims much younger.

WHY? There have been several sweeping social changes since the 1950s that might be the reason why. Our society has changed from an achieving society to a feel-good society. Up until the 1960s, achievement was the most important goal to instill in our children. This goal has been overtaken by the twin goals of happiness and high self-esteem.
The fundamental change consists of two trends. One is toward more individual satisfaction and more individual freedom (consumerism, recreational drugs, daycare, psychotherapy, sexual satisfaction, grade inflation and social promotion in schools). The other is the slide away from individual investment in endeavors larger than the self (God, nation, family, duty).

There is a new difficulty finding meaning in life; in the same historical moment that the self has become all important, a new risk factor for depression, the old spiritual consolations that buffer against depression – God, Nation, Community, Family – have lost their powers.

Why Do We Need to Feel Bad?

- In the campaign to feel good and to enjoy high self-esteem, Americans began to believe that we should strive to avoid dysphoria – anger, sadness, and anxiety. But there is a “good” use to these bad feelings. Anxiety warns you that danger is around. Sadness informs you that a loss threatens. Anger alerts you that someone is trespassing on your domain. Dysphoria is our first line of defense against these things.

- Another good use of bad feeling is “Flow.” This is when time seems to stop and you feel truly at home or “in the flow.” Flow is one of the highest states of positive emotion, a state that makes life worth living. Flow occurs when your skills are used to their utmost, matched against a challenge just barely within our grasp. Too little challenge produces boredom. Too much challenge or too little skill produces helplessness and depression. Flow cannot be achieved without frustration. Success after success, unbroken by failure, will not produce flow. Rewards alone, high-self esteem and confidence do not produce flow. Challenge, frustration and competition all lead to flow.

- Persistence is another use of bad feelings which overcomes helplessness. Your child has only two tactics available when he feels bad. He can stay in the situation and act, trying to terminate the emotion by changing the situation. Or he can give up and leave the situation. This tactic also terminates the emotion by removing the situation altogether. The fist tactic is called mastery, the second is called learned helplessness (Seligman, 2000). In order for your child to experience mastery, it is necessary for him to fail, to feel bad, and to try again repeatedly until success occurs. None of these steps can be circumvented. Failure and feeling bad are necessary building blocks for ultimate success and feeling good.

- Children need to fail. They need to feel sad, anxious and angry. When they encounter obstacles, if we leap to bolster their self-esteem, we make it harder for them to achieve mastery. And if we deprive them of mastery, we weaken self-esteem just as certainly as if we had belittled or humiliated them.
The History of Pessimism/Optimism in America

- An aggressive optimism was the theme of American businesses, family and politics from the time of Andrew Jackson until the end of WWII.
- Pessimism came into fashion as a reaction to the “whistle a happy tune” boosterism of the 1950s which, in many ways, urged the wearing of blinders. It asked people to ignore oppressive reality and even eschew all doubt. Among educated Americans, blind faith was dying. Pessimism escalated in the 1960s to become the required posture of educated Americans. The 1960s and 70s offered ample fodder for pessimism: assassinations, Watergate, Vietnam.
- The pessimism of our children, however, is not inborn. Pessimism is a theory of reality. Children learn this theory from parents, teachers, coaches, and the media.
- In more than 1000 studies, involving more than half a million children and adults, pessimistic people do worse than optimistic people in three major ways:
  1. They get depressed more often;
  2. They achieve less at school, on the job, and on the playing field than their talents augur; and
  3. Their physical health is worse that that of optimists.

What Is Optimism?

- The basis of optimism does not lie in positive phrases or images of victory, but in the way we think about causes. Each of us has habits of thinking about causes, a personality trait Seligman calls “explanatory style.” Explanatory style develops in childhood and, without explicit intervention, is lifelong. There are three crucial dimensions that your child always uses to explain why any particular good or bad event happens to him: permanence, pervasiveness, and personalization.

The Right Way to Criticize Your Child:

- If you criticize your child as lazy, rather than as not trying hard enough today, your child will believe not only that he is lazy, but that his failures come from permanent and unchangeable factors.
- Also, children listen closely to how the adults in their lives interpret their own misfortunes and model their style. If you are a pessimist, your child is learning pessimism directly from you.
- You must, therefore, be thoughtful when you criticize your child, or yourself in front of your child, for you are shaping his explanatory style about self-blame.
- The first rule is accuracy. Exaggerated blame produces guilt and shame beyond what is necessary to galvanize the child to change. But not blame at all erodes responsibility and nullifies the will to change.
- The second rule is that whenever reality allows, you should criticize with an optimistic explanatory style. If your child is at fault, it is important to focus on specific and temporary personal causes, if truth allows, and avoid blaming the child’s character or ability.
There is a Children’s Attributional Style Questionnaire but 8-13 is the target age for the questionnaire. The younger a child is, the harder it if for her to think about her own thinking (metacognition), and all the items on the questionnaire require that the child tell you what she would think if a certain event happened. Children younger than 8 likely have an explanatory style, but it is difficult to measure.

Further Reading:
The Optimistic Child by Martin Seligman (1995)
Authentic Happiness by Martin Seligman (2002)
Learned Optimism by Martin Seligman (1990)