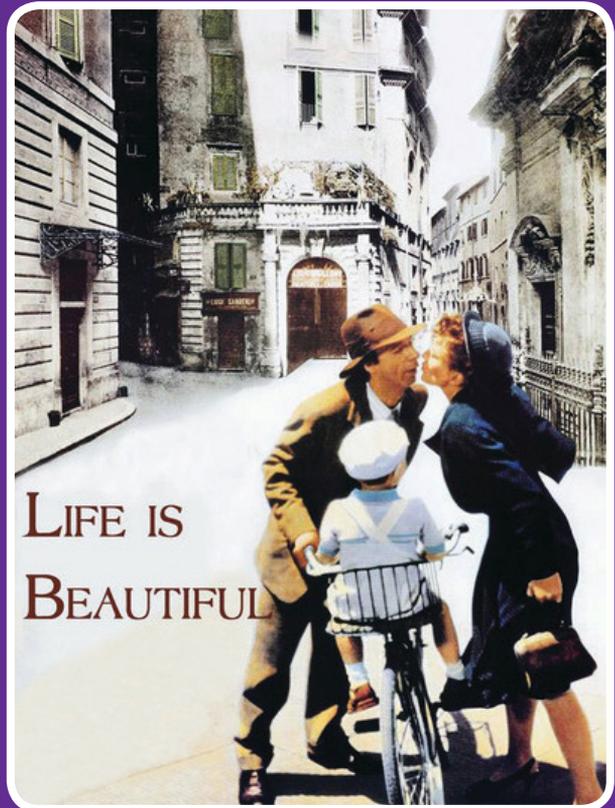


# HOW PARENTS MOODS AFFECT CHILDREN



*Theatrical release poster (1997)*

Imagine! Now, you are in the horrors of internment in a Nazi concentration camp with your five years old son. How can you make your son feels the life is beautiful in the concentration camp?

“Life is Beautiful” is an Italian comedy-drama film directed by and starring Roberto Benigni. It won the Grand Prix at the 1998 Cannes Film Festival, nine David di Donatello Awards in Italy, and three Academy Awards.

The story is about a Jewish Italian father was kept in a German labor camp together with his son (around 5 year-old). In order to enable his son safely going through this horrible situation, the father told his son, “The camp is a complicated game in which you must perform the tasks I give to you. We will earn points for each of the tasks. Whoever in this camp gets to one thousand points first will win a tank. If you cry, complain that you want your mother, or say that you are hungry, we will lose points, while quiet boys who hide from the camp guards earn extra points.” This father went through the 2 years’ hostile and horrible time in the concentration camp by creating a playful, exciting and hopeful atmosphere, also optimistic dialogs with his son. At the end of the story, before the son knowing that his father was killed

*“Prevailing parent moods provide ongoing social contexts in which children’s emotional display are shaped in order to constructively engender parental support and to mitigate parental inattention and irritability.”*

*(Dagne & Snyder, 2016)*



and had just reunified with his mother, he shares the exciting and happy stories happened in the camp game with his mother enthusiastically.

I love this story because it tells how parents can turn the curses into blessings for their children's life by presenting their attitude and mood in an optimistic way. Research by Dagne & Snyder (2016) suggests that prevailing parent moods provide ongoing social contexts in which children's emotional display are shaped in order to constructively engender parental support and to mitigate parental inattention and irritability. However, maintaining one's positive attitude and mood consistently is not easy because there are many challenges triggering our mood.

#### **Causes for Parents' Mood Presentation**

Parents' child-rearing belief; parenting style; child's gender; parent's mental health conditions; marital and family relationship; also social environment such as finance, job, social support etc. are the major causes for parent's different mood presentation. Nevertheless, it is the parent's choice to be pessimistic or optimistic. That would lead to different outcomes of the situation or condition.

#### **Chinese Child-Rearing Belief**

Asian culture is described as collectivism,

which is greatly influenced by Chinese Confucianism. Confucianism promotes family hierarchy and emphasizes filial piety. A study done by Lieber, Fung & Leung (2006) suggested that "Training" and "Shaming" beliefs are common parenting strategies in Hong Kong and Taiwan sample of parents. For "Training" means that parents value active socialization and moral socialization, by assessing their attitudes towards monitoring, regular reminders, modeling, and other social learning strategies. "Shaming" means that parents use shaming the child's wrong doing to foster the development of children's social sensitivities. These practices are similar to the authoritarian parenting style suggested by Baumrind, which is demanding without response to children's emotional need.

Parents with these parenting approaches are usually anxious; easily depressed, frustrated, angry; sometimes aggressive, hostile and feeling helplessness. They are likely controlling, demanding but not responding to children's emotional needs, strict in discipline, using scolding and punishing in their parenting approach. As a consequence, children growing under such authoritarian parenting style, are usually with low self-esteem, fear of failure, weak in communication and expression of emotions, also sad although they might be good at academic performance.

### Child's Gender

In terms of treatment to different gender, parents support more relationship-oriented emotional expression for girls than for boy. On the other hand, parents support more active and instrumental strategies for boys than girls. As a result, girls display more internalized behaviors such as sadness, fear, and other vulnerable emotions in order to get parent's attention. Boys express more anger, display more externalized behaviors and hesitate to share feelings.

### Parental Mental Health

A number of studies indicate that parental mental health plays an important part for children's development. Mother with chronic depression is less active, sensitive, and engaged with their infants. Because of that, an infant around three month-old might have elevated heart rate and greater right frontal lobe asymmetry. For toddlers, it might cause them being passive non-compliance, more aggressive, poor cognitive and linguistic performance. Whereas, father with chronic depression is disengaged or being aggressive. He could cause more father-child conflict; internalizing symptoms such as depressed mood and externalizing symptoms such as aggression; also social and behavioral problems, with stronger impact to boys of age three.

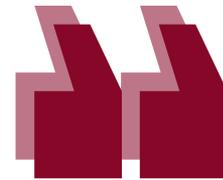
### Marital and Family Relationship

Moreover, marital and family relationship is a common trigger for mood and emotion. It is found that custodial mother and father are usually lonely, impatient and depressed. Therefore, they might be isolated, less warm and loving; less monitoring and less consistent; also more authoritarian, using more punishment. Non-custodial father is commonly found being inconsistent and disengaged so they are overly permissive and indulgent during visit in the first few months, then, declines in number of their visit. In response to parents' marital discord, preschool children usually blame themselves, and six to eight year-old children get worse emotionally in long-term consequence.

Boys are more likely to present immediate distress and poor academic performance. Whereas, girls might not show immediate



*Optimism can come from the turn-around of parents' negative expression of emotions, explanatory style and teachers or coaches' criticisms on reality or biases" (Seligman, Reivieh, Jayeox, & Gillham, 2007)*



symptoms but are commonly found having emotional regulations issue in late adolescence or early adulthood stage.

Moreover, in a coercive family with a lot of aggressive interaction, parents rarely reinforce prosocial behaviors but use more harsh discipline and reward children's aggressiveness. Children growing up in such family learn using aggressiveness to deal with stress, to gain approval and attention.

### Social Environment

Sometimes, parenting stress is coming from redundancy, immigration, lacking of emergency childcare, sharing in time of stress, financial assistance, and excess focus on children's academic results. Parents under such situation might have feelings of incompetence, depression, anger, anxiety, fear and insecurity. The immediate coping might be practicing harsh parenting, including yelling, name calling, physical threats, aggression, poor parenting monitoring and disengaged with children. This parenting approach impacts negatively especially to adolescents, who might cope with the situation by using drug, becoming delinquency, committing suicide. Children growing up in such intensively stressful condition could become mentally ill.



### Pessimism and Optimism in Children

How parents can present a positive mood while they are under a lot of emotional triggers coming from their own child-rearing belief, marital and family relationship, also their social environment? By reading Dr. Seligman's book, you may be able to get some insight. He is the pioneer for positive psychology. He suggested, "Optimism can come from the turn-around of parents' negative expression of emotions, explanatory styles and teachers or coaches' criticisms on reality and biases"

In his book "The optimistic child: A proven program to safeguard children against depression and build lifelong resilience", he explained that the negative expression contains pessimistic message that make children see that good things happen temporarily, for specific situation only and is not dispositional. For example, parent may say, "You got 5 more marks because you were lucky." On the other hand, bad things happen permanently, always pervasive, and is dispositional. Parent may say, "You failed in the examination. You will never pass in any examinations because you are stupid."

However, Dr. Seligman suggested that we can turn-around the message and express it in an optimistic way. Children can see the opposite that good things happen permanently, always pervasive, and is disposi-

tional. For example, "You got 5 more marks because of your hard work. If you continue to work hard, you will get passed and even a better result." Bad things happen temporarily, for specific situation only and not dispositional. Parent can say, "You failed in the examination this time. You were doing well in the past and in subjects. If you could review what make it difficult for you in this examination, you could improve for next time."

The father in the film had demonstrated how he turned the negative situation into a positive expression through his sense of humor, positive attitude and hopeful spirit. If parents can do that, too, we will see more and more optimism and resilience in children.

### About the Author

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