Session 6 – Changing “Red” Thoughts into “Green” Thoughts (I = I can try!)

In Session 5 your child learnt what we mean by “thoughts”, and that there are two different types of thoughts – red and green. The next step is to learn to turn red thoughts into more helpful green thoughts (we call this “bossing back” our red thoughts). While everybody has red thoughts sometimes, we need to catch our red thoughts and turn them into green thoughts to help make ourselves feel better.

We can choose to think green thoughts and to feel calm, happy and brave.

Examples of helpful (green) thoughts are:

- At least I had a go. If I keep practising I’ll get better.
- It doesn’t matter what anybody else thinks!
- I can try my best!

Be aware that bossing back unhelpful thoughts is just like learning any other new skill – it takes lots of practice! But it is worth the effort, because it can make a huge difference in our ability to cope with difficult situations.

Concepts/skills/techniques

- Throwing away red thoughts
- Challenging unhelpful thoughts
- Encouraging changing red thoughts to green thoughts

Tips for parents

- Provide praise when your child is able to say their thoughts aloud, whether they be unhelpful or helpful.
- The most effective way to help your child avoid negative thinking is through example. Voice your green thoughts regularly and avoid voicing red thoughts. If parents continually put themselves down and adopt an “I can’t” attitude, their children will copy. Stay positive and support your child’s positive behaviour!
• If you recognise that you are saying unhelpful words or feeling tense or nervous, then let your child know that you are aware of this. Then demonstrate coming up with a more positive way of looking at your situation. For example, if you are getting stressed about being late for work, instead of saying “I can’t believe I’m running late. Knowing my luck I’ll get all the red lights!” you could say “I’m just going to stay calm and I will get to work eventually. At least I can listen to my favourite CD as I drive!”.

• When a family member has a red thought, the other family members come up with green thoughts to talk back to the red thought.

• Catch your child when they have red thoughts and actively help them to turn them into green thoughts. It is important to help your child practise bossing back unhelpful thoughts such as “I can’t do it” and replace them with more positive thoughts such as “I know it’s hard, but I can have a go and try my best.” We can be the boss of our thoughts!

• You could also play the traffic light game. When you come to a set of traffic lights, see who can be the first person to come up with a red thought about a particular topic, when the light turns green the idea of the game is to turn that RED thought into a positive GREEN thought.

• Make sure your child’s green thoughts are realistic – otherwise they might lead to disappointment. For example, before their first soccer match, it is not helpful to think “I am going to score 10 goals!”, because this is not likely to happen. Encourage more helpful and realistic green thoughts, such as “It’d be great to score a goal, but as long as I have fun and try my best it doesn’t matter!”.

• Another way we can help our children change unhelpful to helpful thoughts is to challenge them by asking certain questions, and looking for evidence against the unhelpful thoughts. Adopt the role of a detective to find out if their red thoughts are really true! Examples of questions to challenge your child’s red thoughts:

  - Is that really true?
  - Are you exaggerating?
  - Are you sure?
  - What’s the worst thing that could happen?

• Be prepared to practise and make an effort - the more you and your child practise the skill of challenging unhelpful thoughts, the more control you and your child will have over your feelings and behaviour!