

# Optimistic Teaming

Coordination Strategies for  
Tough Student Situations

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 CORWIN

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Downloadable versions of each of the appendices are available at:  
<https://resources.corwin.com/optimisticteaming>

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

After 20 years of friendship and countless hours spent collaborating on all sorts of teams, we have finally “teamed-up” for our first book together. Why did this take so long? Well, after we both graduated from the University of Utah, we sort of took separate paths. Dr. Belnap began working in hospitals and clinics, and I began working in public schools. Along the way, we both became “dads” and did what most parents (attempt) to do and sought the coveted “work–life balance.” While we can’t say we’ve ever achieved such a balance, over the years, we’ve been able to circle back together as friends and colleagues to dish on what has worked (and what hasn’t).

We’d like to acknowledge these experiences starting with our training at the University of Utah. It was on the principles and practices of this program that we were able to enter a workforce as capable practitioners—and good friends. We’d also like to acknowledge our families. Without their support, we’d never have had the time to geek-out and visit about all our successes and failures (ample amounts of both, by the way). Finally, we’d like to acknowledge all the teams we’ve been a part of over the years. In our line of work (e.g., parent training, behavior management, mental health, and special education, etc.) teams and teaming are a big deal. We’ve learned so much from our teammates and the children/families we have served.

We’d also like to thank Jessica Allan, Mia Rodriguez, and their team at Corwin for helping us put our thoughts, ideas, and solutions to paper. We are so grateful for the dedication to

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# PREFACE

## Origins

You could hear a pin drop. V. Mark Durand silenced a ballroom filled with scholars from all over the world with a simple question: “What is the single most accurate predictor that our positive intervention plan is actually going to succeed?” It was 2016, and by this time my coauthor and I had been working for a few years as administrators in special education and student services, respectively. We had selected V. Mark Durand’s session because it spoke to us. His session was labeled something like, “An Optimistic Approach to Working With Challenging Student Behavior.”

The title of his session tapped into something we had felt but never articulated: Navigating serious behavior situations in schools was daunting (sometimes debilitating) work, and the attitudes of our teams were often a serious obstacle to finding success. As administrators and psychologists, we had seen educators enter and then exit the workforce abruptly based on their experiences with student behavior. We had witnessed parents sobbing about the challenges of their child. As you can imagine, optimism was hard to come by in our work and we wanted—needed—some strategies to help cultivate it.

Mercifully, V. Mark Durand answered his own question. He did so after many of the scholars in the room pontificated what they believed to be the most accurate predictor of intervention success (e.g., treatment fidelity, qualifications of personnel, etc.).

He responded with a gentle authority, “Optimism. Our levels of optimism are the single most accurate predictor that our interventions will succeed.”

He silenced the room, and we knew. We knew in that instant he was right. We felt it. We didn’t just feel it in the room that day, we had felt it over our entire careers. Every school team we worked with had access to evidence-based behavioral interventions, yet many of these interventions fell short (or failed miserably). However, not every school team we worked with had access to healthy, authentic feelings of optimism. V. Mark Durand not only articulated what we had observed over our careers, but he shared his research and how he discovered the predictive value of optimism on successful behavioral interventions.

We saw immediate application of his research into practice in our training/consultative work around the country. We even added a module to our already successful training, ASPEN, called “Optimistic Teaming.” The entire module was dedicated to Durand’s “highlight reel” of research. We also included an entire chapter on the approach in the book *Happy Kids Don’t Punch You in the Face* (2018).

Fast-forward 5 years and “Optimistic Teaming” has become the most critical aspect of our work in supporting school teams and parents. It has also become the most popular. It should come as no surprise: Teams tasked with managing dangerous and/or aggressive student behavior are desperate for any light at the end of their very long, dark tunnels of work.

We can’t wait to share what we’ve discovered to help teams all over the country not only remain optimistic but make lasting (positive) changes in the lives of the students and their school teams.

### Overview

*Optimistic Teaming* exists to integrate and expand our practical brand of teaming into already established frameworks designed to help educators and students alike. What are these established frameworks? Response to Intervention (RTI), Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), and Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). When we apply our approach to teams operating under the RTI, MTSS, IEPs, and PLC frameworks, we get to witness and participate in what V. Mark Durand shared: Successful intervention outcomes! Integrating our approach within these systems not only supports the systems, but the teams operating within them as well. The best part? You will get the perk of working in teams brimming with positive emotions, engagement, resilience, meaning, and accomplishment.



We've organized this book to be your ready-to-use guide to understanding how to build and sustain healthy levels of optimism in teams. First, readers will be (re)introduced to those big, hairy problems we encounter so regularly working in schools and how best to respond as a team. Second, readers will be able to identify the solid research and evidence base of leveraging optimism individually and in teams. Then, we will guide readers through step-by-step methods to maximize the teams we find ourselves on. (Teams in public schools tend to be more like family—we don't really get to choose our family. Often, we don't get to really choose our teams working in schools, either. This dynamic tends to create interesting barriers, yet with our methods, it can also create some very interesting solutions.) Finally, readers will be able to leverage optimism alongside other principles of positive psychology to produce successful outcomes for their team.

## Rationale

The rationale behind *Optimistic Teaming* is to help school systems build optimistic and successful teams within the respective frameworks of RTI, MTSS, IEPs, and PLCs. Navigating what is essentially the “acronym soup” of public education systems has never been easy. When individuals and their teams begin to face this not-so-easy task, they need more than a phony “let's-turn-that-frown-upside-down” type of positivity. What they need are concrete steps to build sustainable levels of belief and efficacy for each of us. With that in mind, *Optimistic Teaming* will:

- Serve as a desk reference for current research, theory, and practice across the areas of applied positive psychology and optimism on school teams.
- Provide ready-to-use strategies and tools to help teams flourish in the face of challenging student misbehavior.
- Be different from every other book on the topic because it is fresh, fun, and organized for modern-day (see also: crazy busy) educators, administrators, specialists, and all the teams in which they operate.
- Provide a unique reading experience where formal theories and constructs of human behavior are braided with an informal, conversational tone.

## Goals

As much as we want this book to be the catalyst for fundamental changes in the way we organize ourselves in school teams and address student behavioral problems, we really just want this book to help readers in the following ways:

1. Identify and accept the Wicked Problems we face in public schools.
2. Understand the supportive research and evidence base behind optimism.
3. Possess a deep understanding of the building blocks of optimism in ourselves and each other.
4. Access practical tools to build an optimistic self and an optimistic team.
5. Apply PRISM powers to battle VUCA (you'll have to read the book to better understand those acronyms).
6. Help children affected by trauma, mood, and behavior disorders improve their sense of success and belonging in the school setting and beyond.

Certainly, we have infused some of our own personalities and perspectives with these procedures. We have done so simply based on the feedback from the teams we've been a part of. Many of our teammates have shared their gratitude for our optimistic strategies. We have learned so much from our teammates (both what we should continue and things we should discontinue)! This book is not just our ideas and applications of those ideas. This book is also built upon the real-life feedback from the teams we have worked with. We find great pleasure in sharing both our successes and failures to help articulate what this work requires (and what it does not) to be a positive, optimistic teammate.

### Intended Audience

This book is intended for a broad range of educators, specialists, and administrators working in public schools. The content has been previously provided (via training seminars and consultations) to hundreds of educators with backgrounds in leadership, general education, special education, school psychology, and school counseling. The content is also valuable for classified employees such as paraprofessionals and volunteers. In fact, one of the driving philosophies of *Optimistic Teaming* is that every team member can either charge or drain our optimism batteries. Really, this book is intended to help anyone interested in (a) improving outcomes for students exhibiting challenging behavior problems, (b) understanding team dynamics, and (c) applying principles of positive psychology and optimism to their teams.

### Anticipated Uses

*Optimistic Teaming* is anticipated to help busy educators, always up against the clock, with some ready-to-use strategies and

easily accessible content regarding what it takes to build a team brimming with optimism. In other words, *Optimistic Teaming* is designed to be in the reader's hands as opposed to the reader's bookshelf. Educators can feel comfortable carrying this book with them to study and reference as they work to build optimism in their teams. An individual educator may utilize this book to gain a deeper understanding of what it takes to enlist optimism as a strategy as well as an attitude. This book may also serve as the topic of a book study for teams as they are presented with challenging student behavior. It is important to us that the content, strategies, and tools of *Optimistic Teaming* be shared liberally. As educators, our collective efficacy is dependent upon our willingness to share what works. In addition to an easily accessible handbook, *Optimistic Teaming* is also anticipated to be the source material for comprehensive trainings for school personnel working with children exhibiting aggressive and/or dangerous behavior. Training seminars are available for any educator eager to apply the principles of *Optimistic Teaming* to their school and/or district.

### The Organization of *Optimistic Teaming*

Apart from the introductory section and the concluding section, *Optimistic Teaming* is divided into six core chapters. Each of the chapters is organized with what we affectionately refer to as a “Neff Box” at the beginning and a “tools section” at the end. Neff Boxes are our efforts to both recognize another excellent author (Dr. Kristin Neff) and all her contributions to the field of self-compassion. Every chapter will introduce a “Neff Box” with some self-compassionate wisdom from Dr. Kristin Neff. As it turns out, the most crucial teammate we can help is ourselves. That's right. If we want to improve the optimism of our teams, we've got to start with building optimism and self-compassion in ourselves first.

At the conclusion of every chapter, the reader will be directed to relevant (and ready-to-use) strategies associated with the content of the chapter. The tools and resources are plentiful, and most of these tools will be in the appendix and available online for you to download.

In Chapter 1, we will introduce Wicked Problems and Radical Acceptance. This chapter will explore the pioneering work of Marsha Linehan (and others) in detail. We will learn how critical it is to acknowledge all of the things we don't have control over and all of things we do. Then, we will walk through how to accept our realities as they truly are and not as we expect them to be.

In Chapter 2, we will guide you through a jam-packed literature review complete with all the evidence you'll ever need to build the case of optimism in our teams. In this chapter, not only will we

review meta-analytic studies and applied research, but we will also begin to learn what optimism is and what it is not. This chapter rounds out with a challenge to each of us: We must build a bridge from the research regarding the significance of optimism to the practice of supporting our teams facing less-than-ideal circumstances.

In Chapter 3, we will explore the DNA of optimism so that we (and our teams) are all on the same page about, well, optimism! Think of this chapter as a method to obtain team consensus about the nature and composition of optimism. In other words, if our definition of optimism is different than that of our teammates, we're missing the point. The goal of this chapter is to ensure that we're all marching to the same (optimistic) beat as a team.

In Chapter 4, we will present you with what might be our favorite contribution to team dynamics, like, ever. We will walk readers through both the "shiny" and the "shadow" sides of team personnel dynamics. Essentially, we identify the most common personality types we encounter in teams and share how to maximize their "shiny sides" and compensate for their "shadow sides." Radically shifting our response to awkward team dynamics from "Is this a good fit?" to "We fit!" may be the most innovative process introduced to teams tasked with solving challenging student dilemmas.

In Chapter 5, we add the secret sauce, the binding glue, the generative fuel to maintain and sustain our optimistic teams. The field of positive psychology continues to provide the gifts that keep on giving. Our target in this chapter is to provide the foundational elements of positive psychology to help school teams battle volatility (e.g., dangerous student behavior), uncertainty (e.g., staffing, training), complexity (e.g., policy, special education law, and ambiguity (e.g., vagueness of implementation)). How? We introduce PRISM Power. Prospection (e.g., surveying the lay of the land of staff and student supports), resilience (e.g., rolling with setbacks), innovation (e.g., creative problem-solving), social support (e.g., building healthy relationships), and mattering (e.g., mattering to kids, mattering to each other, and mattering to ourselves).

In Chapter 6, we take all the lessons learned in Chapters 1–5 and braid them together in succinct, reproducible steps for teams. This chapter is ideal for any team lead or any person on a team tasked (and motivated) to reach positive outcomes and improve student behavior. You may be tempted to jump right to this chapter and get started on building your optimistic team this minute! While we don't recommend it, you can certainly give it a shot. Of course, we would rather you spend some time digging deeper into the concepts shared in Chapters 1–5. Just like

everything else in this world, the growth comes from the work. (Note: We also know you're terribly busy, so yeah, if you jump to this chapter—we totally get it!)

This book will conclude with a look at our “Optimistic Teaming Hall of Fame.” We will share anecdotes about our most optimistic (and therefore successful) teams. It is worth noting that all the teams we discuss have all come from school settings. As such, the teams with whom we have worked were typically multidisciplinary with administrators, educators, and specialists across general and special education settings.

## Special Features

One constant obstacle we face as teammates and educators is time. As such, the special features of *Optimistic Teaming* are not only designed to be immediately accessible, but they are also designed to save you and your teammates time. In each of our tools sections, there are downloadable links to beautiful PDFs, editable documents, and high-definition PNG files. These digital files have been designed to be downloaded directly to your computer or smartphone for your convenience. The PDF, editable documents, and PNG files contain mostly two types of resources: infographics and templates. The infographics are colorful, high-resolution digital files summarizing key concepts found in the chapters. When used correctly, infographics are stunning visual portrayals of concepts and/or processes. The idea of a template is fairly self-explanatory. The templates within *Optimistic Teaming* are ready to use on their own or you can adapt them to the needs of your team.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



**Ben Springer** is an award-winning and nationally certified school psychologist. Dr. Springer is also the author of the popular books *Happy Kids Don't Punch You in the Face* (2018) and *GPS: Good Parenting Strategies* (2021). Dr. Springer has served in schools as an autism specialist, school psychologist, behavior specialist, and Director of Special Education. In 2017, Dr. Springer founded Totem PD, a professional development company for educators and mental health practitioners, with Dr. Ben Belnap.



**Ben Belnap** is an award-winning clinical psychologist practicing in the state of Utah. Dr. Belnap has contributed to state and national professional learning trainings for over a decade focusing on the applications of Positive Psychology, Family Systems, and Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy. Dr. Belnap has served in schools as an assistant superintendent of student services, behavior specialist, and school psychologist. Dr. Belnap currently manages a neuropsychology and counseling clinic in Heber City, Utah, and helps manage Totem PD as a trainer and consultant.

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