



An RBC® white paper on the findings from
the RBC Youth Optimism Study

The Worried Generation

By Rona Maynard



A note from RBC

When we launched the RBC Kids Pledge in 2013, we knew it was ambitious; never before had a Canadian company pledged \$100 million to help kids.

The \$100 million figure got the headlines, yet it was not the real story. As Canada's largest corporate donor, we would have invested that much in kids as a matter of course. But we deliberately tucked two more commitments into the back of our pledge: we said we'd improve the well-being of a million kids, and we'd do it over five years.

That was the real news. It signalled our intention not only to define "well-being", but also to track whether the programs we're funding actually help improve it, all within a fairly aggressive time frame.

We knew this would be much easier said than done. Both RBC and our charitable partners are comfortable tracking the number of dollars donated, number of programs run, number of kids in each program and the like. And while many well-intentioned organizations run great programs, they don't always have the resources or capacity to prove they're making the intended impact.

How could RBC best help young people? We determined that we should continue funding programs that help kids develop skills and knowledge, such as how to study or prepare a nutritious lunch through the RBC After School Project; get real on-the-job training through RBC Career Launch; or learn how to skate through the RBC Learn to Play Project. Then we selected a handful of key performance indicators that have been proven to help kids develop skills and knowledge and put a plan in place for gathering impact data on these from our charitable partners.

But we were not about to stop there. We sensed something going on that our existing efforts weren't addressing. The young Canadians who will shape this country's future are reaching adulthood in an emotional slump—worried about job prospects and fearful that life will pass them by. As a permanently altered world puts all young Canadians to a challenging test that will not end anytime soon, we and our charitable partners now confront an additional question: how to light the spark of optimism in every child before worry narrows their horizons.

We are convinced that the way to ensure the well-being of youth is not simply to treat their distress but to equip them early with the emotional toolbox they will need to thrive. And we also believe that Canadians can work together to ease the tumultuous passages of growing up—settling in at a new school, finding and losing love, weathering a death or divorce in the family, and finally, claiming a place of one's own in the world.

We have access to a wealth of information from specialists and experts. But what better way to mark our starting point than by hearing from youth themselves? They know better than anyone else what drives optimism in the young. We wanted to uncover it.

With the first RBC Youth Optimism Study, we have done just that.

The study provides an unprecedented sounding of young people's feelings about their lives. Completed in the fall of 2014 by Ipsos Reid and prepared in consultation with an expert panel, the survey gives voice to nearly 2,400 young Canadians aged 10 to 25, in every province. We asked what excites them and what worries them—today and for the future. We probed attitudes toward themselves, their pleasures and their opportunities.

The message we heard is resoundingly clear: between childhood and late adolescence, hope and happiness nosedive. And the malaise can follow them into adulthood.

This first study lays the groundwork for an ongoing inquiry with profound implications for parents, educators, governments and service providers. We invite you to join us in an ongoing national conversation about a mounting crisis in hope and happiness.

Lynn Patterson
Director, Corporate Responsibility

For a full copy of the
RBC Youth Optimism
Survey results, visit
www.rbc.com/kids.

The Optimism Crisis

The pathway to every life milestone begins with a dream. From trying out for hockey to enrolling in college, seeing Paris to landing a career-making job, most Canadians over 40 can remember when visions of someday defined growing up and a bright future beckoned, just as Dr. Seuss promised in his best-selling book, *Oh, the Places You'll Go!*: “You have brains in your head. You have feet in your shoes. You can steer yourself any direction you choose.”¹

Twenty-five years and more than 10 million copies after its first publication, *Oh, the Places You'll Go!* remains a popular graduation gift, but our youth have never been so doubtful that the future is theirs to shape. Coming of age, once a time of celebration, is for many a time of reassessment and retreat. Chastened by bleak predictions about their prospects in the job market, today's young Canadians begin to lose hope in adolescence and reach the threshold of adulthood in the doldrums. They speak their minds in the RBC Youth Optimism Study, a landmark portrait of a generation raised on bad news. Says Lisa Wolff, Director of Policy and Education for UNICEF Canada and an advisor to the study, “I think some parents would be very surprised at how worried kids are.”

At 24, one young man reels off a litany of fears: “Not finding a job, not having enough money to pay off debts, or being able to afford a living for myself. I worry that I won't have enough money to retire...I worry that I'll never find someone to spend my life with. I worry so much it's becoming ridiculous.”

If 24 is no longer too young to fret about retirement, it's no wonder that 10- to- 13-year-olds are already anxious about job prospects – their number one worry for the future. At this age the unease is just a faint background noise: 80 per cent still believe they can achieve anything they want. But this proportion falls to 57 per cent among 18- to- 21-year olds, rebounding only slightly among 22- to-25-year-olds. The closer youth come to adulthood, the louder the drumbeat of alarm. They tell us they worry about “failure,” to which one young woman adds “becoming a leech on my family.”

As the future loses its sheen, so does the present. More than 90 per cent of pre-teens agree with the statements “I have a good life” and “My parents(s) believe in me.” Three-quarters of 18- to-21-year-olds do. One respondent in this group says she feels like “an inconvenient presence for those around me.”

Despite the plaintive note in many young voices, this is no time for hand-wringing. An overwhelming majority of young Canadians describe themselves as “a positive person,” and most are looking to the future with excitement. Like previous generations, they want to see the world, raise their family and make their mark as anything from writers to rocket scientists. But a disgruntled minority have fallen into such a funk that they can barely face a day, much less a life. Among 18- to-21-year-olds, the most vulnerable group, a fifth of young men and a third of young women are living in the shadow of worry. As one 20-something woman tells it, she has “NOTHING. NOTHING TO LOOK FORWARD TO.”

“I think some parents would be very surprised at how worried kids are.”

Lisa Wolff
UNICEF Canada

Her despondency does not surprise Dr. Ian Manion, Executive Director of the Ontario Centre of Excellence in Child and Youth Mental Health, member of RBC's expert panel and longtime clinician. He has never seen so many floundering late teens and 20-somethings. Whether they are dropping out of school or signing on for one more course of study in the hope of securing a paycheque, unemployed or unable to stick with the job they have, they are ill prepared for adulthood. Unwilling to become

¹ Dr. Seuss, *Oh, the Places You'll Go!*, Random House for Young Readers, 1990.

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Dr. Ian Manion
Ontario Centre of Excellence
in Child and Youth Mental Health

workaholics like their parents, they can't picture an achievable alternative. Observes Dr. Manion, “The danger is that they will start to disengage, get stuck in a holding pattern with the potential to stunt their progression. If you have difficulty seeing a positive future, that can translate into anxiety, depression, substance abuse—all of which become more common at this stage of life.”

There's no mistaking young adults' neediness.

Counsellors at Good2Talk, a 24-hour helpline for Ontario college and university students with mental health concerns, are on track to field 20,000 calls this year—four times the expected demand, after less than two years in operation.

But new services for this hard-hit age group, essential as they are, will not solve the optimism crisis. The quest for a foothold in the job market has never been so taxing. Says Sharon Wood, President and CEO of Kids Help Phone, a longtime RBC partner, “If you've been turned down a hundred times for a job, your resilience takes a bit of a hit and it's hard not to take it personally.” The time has clearly come to prepare every child for harsh new realities. As Dr. Manion sums up, “Building resilience should start much earlier than adolescence.”

Why Optimism Matters

The world this generation will inherit is not the one their parents used to know, where a well-equipped house and two cars awaited any hard worker with the right post-secondary degree. Today's youth must navigate a maze of micro-jobs and short-term contracts that, with luck, might lead to a cubicle of their own. They will need the resourcefulness to create plans B through Z, the resilience to bounce back from disappointment and the troubleshooting skills to learn from failure instead of giving in to despair. This is the 21st century toolbox. And what puts these tools to work is optimism.

Unless young people can envision a rewarding future, they will not find the will to make it happen, one step at a time. But too often we have failed to teach them that success requires hopeful perseverance. Seduced by the self-esteem fad, we have instead taught them that success is their due. With the best of intentions, we have set them up for disappointment. Writes Martin Seligman, a psychologist at the University of Pennsylvania, in *The Optimistic Child*, “... there is no 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.”² This is where optimism comes in. Seligman's research has shown not only that it helps prevent depression in the young, but also that it can be taught. Although some kids are by nature more optimistic than others, most can learn cognitive and social skills that foster it—a process he calls “psychological immunization.”

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Martin Seligman
University of Pennsylvania

² Martin Seligman, *The Optimistic Child*, Houghton Mifflin paperback edition, 2007, p. 33.

The Power of Emotional Connection



Resilience depends in no small measure on a sense of connectedness to others—a theme that reverberates throughout the study. From pre-teens to young adults, upbeat respondents feel supported and uplifted by those around them. Asked what they most look forward to today, they might say “coming home from school to see my dad,” “seeing my

little sister” or “seeing my grandmother for one more day before she passes away, and another day of health for us all.” One young man, a minimum-wage dishwasher in a restaurant, looks forward to another day with colleagues who “all work as a team and...help each other out...I told my boss about a neurological condition that I have and he took it really well, which is awesome.”

Compared to pessimists, optimists show better social skills. They are more likely to be influenced by family, teachers, other mentors and coaches. On bad days optimists are much more likely to confide in someone than pessimists, who tend to bottle up their troubles or seek comfort in junk food and other bad habits.

The counsellors at Kids Help Phone, a longtime RBC partner, know this pattern intimately. In a typical week, the free and confidential service takes more than 5,000 calls from young

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people across the country who are struggling with everything from fear of fat to abuse and suicide. Alisa Simon, Vice President of Counselling Services and Programs, says that many young callers have nowhere else to turn. “We ask kids, ‘Who in your life can you count on? Who would you feel safe talking to about this?’” A significant number cannot name someone they would reach out to.”

This emotional isolation may shed light on a disturbing trend: Canada’s poor showing in international studies of young people’s life satisfaction. A 2011 UNICEF report card ranked Canada 24th out of 29 industrialized countries—just ahead of nations in the former Eastern bloc.³ This is no temporary blip: young Canadians’ moods has darkened steadily over the past decade, even as poverty rates have declined.⁴ Says Wolff, “The drop in life satisfaction scores was greater in Canada than in just about any other country.” Why this has happened we can only speculate, but it’s probably no coincidence that Canadian children report a harder time talking to their parents than do peers almost everywhere else. They’re also much less likely to find classmates “kind and helpful.”

³ Stuck in the Middle: Report Card 11, Child Well-Being in Rich Countries: a Comparative Overview (Canadian Companion), pg. 8.

⁴ Children of the Recession: Report Card 12 (Canadian Companion), p.4.

The Power of Meaningfulness

Nothing gives purpose to a day like anticipating something you enjoy. Compared to pessimists, optimists are much more likely to believe their daily activities are worthwhile (72 per cent versus 28 per cent). And they have many rewards to get them out of bed: saying hello to the new puppy at breakfast (a pre-teen), writing an adventure story or identifying a new species of bird (mid-teens), cooking something delicious (late teens and 20-somethings). Some express deep gratitude for everyday pleasures such as “a roof over my head, food in the fridge and friends to comfort me” (early twenties).

Just over two-thirds of young optimists agree with the statement “Each day I look forward to having a lot of fun.” Only 23 per cent of pessimists do. Upbeat youth, a well-rounded group, are having fun with their friends, at school and on the playing field. Of respondents who say they are excited about the future, 41 per cent play sports. Only a quarter of the worried and neutral group do.

Nothing gives purpose to a day like anticipating something you enjoy.

There is nothing frivolous about fun. According to data from the RBC Youth Optimism Study, the ability to have fun is a key driver of feeling you can achieve anything you want, which in turn stimulates hope for the future.

Yet fun is under threat these days. Not so long ago, fun meant building a snow fort, exploring the neighbourhood on a bike or lying on the grass watching clouds drift by. Children could pursue their own notions of fun, with occasional forays into adult-directed activities such as piano lessons or gymnastics. Then came the era of fear. Alarmed by media reports of crimes against children and concerned about an ever-tighter job market, parents looked to the safety and presumed competitive edge offered by structured classes. Lisa Wolff of UNICEF is one of many experts who believe the programmed life is holding young people back: “Kids have fewer opportunities for unstructured play that will let them discover they are resilient and competent. We seem to be taking all the risk out of childhood.”



The Gender Factor: Sad Boys, Worried Girls



Boys and girls make subtly different journeys along the arc of hope and happiness. Both genders reach the low point in late adolescence. But generally speaking, boys are more excited about the future while girls are happier. Boys' excitement only takes them so far, however. Between the pre-teen years and late adolescence (18 to 21), they crash. The proportion of boys who describe themselves as happy plummets from 87 per cent to 63 per cent—likely because boys have a harder time opening up to people who could help them.

At Kids Help Phone, calls from boys taper off between about 13 and 18. Comments Sharon Wood, President and CEO of Kids Help Phone, “For boys there’s this feeling of ‘I should be able to handle this.’ They wait longer to reach out, so by the time they get to us, the issue might be more serious.”

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While unhappiness mounts in boys, worry increases in girls. The proportion of girls who worry about the future soars from 4 per cent at 10 to 13 to 33 per cent at 18 to 21—more than an eightfold increase. Young women at this age are the most worried, least excited people we surveyed. And they are also the most likely to blame themselves when something goes wrong.

What the RBC Youth Optimism Study Means to Parents

It's not just young adults who are stressed and overwhelmed these days. The permanently transformed workplace has many parents reeling too. Those with longer commutes and hours are coming home exhausted with endless to-do lists, if not fears for their job security. They are trying just as hard as their own parents did to guide their children with a steady hand. But their road map to success is in tatters and the GPS does not yet exist, prompting Wolff to ask, "What are the messages that we're unconsciously sending to our kids?" A teen girl who fears "that my mom won't find a job and we will be poor" has surely heard the strain in her mother's voice.

Parents offer the suggestions that made sense only yesterday—enrol in this course (or that one), take this job (or a gap year), move back home to save rent (or back out to save strain on the family). For perfectly understandable reasons, parents' view of how to progress may be seriously out of sync with what their children are seeing. Says Wolff, "This survey invites parents to ask their kids, 'What are you feeling about your life and your future, what are you feeling good about, what's bothering you?' Opening up a conversation is a good way to start understanding what they're dealing with."

Most parents assume that if their child were troubled, one of them—most likely Mom—would be the first to know, according to the 2012 RBC Children's Mental Health Parents Poll.⁵ Yet they could very well be mistaken. A companion poll of children and youth by Kids Help Phone found that friends are the confidantes of choice, with Mom a distant second. Twenty per cent would keep their problem to themselves. It all comes down to this: to know what your child is thinking, you must ask—and listen.

Every day presents opportunities to help young people learn resilience. When a child sees not being invited to a party as proof that no one likes her, Mom or Dad can lead her through a reality check. A teen deflated by a poor report card can be prompted to troubleshoot: Should he have studied harder? Is he in the wrong stream? Does he need extra help? And as for the impact on his university chances, whose idea is it that he must go? As Dr. Manion points out, "We may have sold young people a bill of goods in the sense that the way to success was supposed to be university when there are incredibly well paid trades. Why don't we value that as much as another lawyer in the family?"

Just because the future will look nothing like the recent past does not mean today's youth are doomed to disappointment.

It's a rare parent who has not said, in a fretful moment, "I wouldn't want to be young today." But just because the future will look nothing like the recent past does not mean today's youth are doomed to disappointment. If Canadians are truly committed to their success, we must redefine it with them and practice the art of resilience alongside them. We must share what we learn along the way with educators and all levels of government, because this is too big and too urgent a project for parents to bear on their own. By shining the spotlight on optimism from year to year, RBC proposes to inform and enrich that project with an evolving, youth's-eye of how the future looks to those who will shape it. Let the conversation begin.

⁵ RBC Children's Mental Health Parents Poll, http://www.rbc.com/community-sustainability/_assets-custom/pdf/2012-RBC-Childrens-Mental-Health-Parents-Poll.pdf, 2012.

Profiles in Optimism

From Cancer Patient to Olympian: An Optimist's Journey



Brian Price, Olympic medalist

When Brian Price was seven and in his first year of treatment for leukemia, he cried at the news that he would have to relive the worst pain of his life—a lumbar puncture. The first one had left him doubled over and hobbling on an IV pole. “I can’t, it hurts too much,” he protested. Replied his mother, “Brian, if I could trade places with you, I would, but I can’t. You have to do this to live.”

Young Brian had no idea what staying alive would require—four and a half years of lumbar punctures and debilitating treatments. Recovery was a finish line he could not see, yet he learned that perseverance would move him forward. “I knew that when I got the red drug in my IV, the next week or two would really suck,” he says, “but if I got through that I’d get three good weeks and maybe get back to school for a week.”

He would one day set his sights on an Olympic finish line, as a championship rower going for gold. After winning three World Championships (2002, 2003 and 2007), Price garnered two Olympic medals in the men’s eight (2008 and 2012). He credits childhood cancer with setting him on the course. The drugs, which stunted his growth, made him the perfect size for a coxswain (5’4” and 120 pounds).

In his 10-year rowing career, Price contended with demanding coaches, formidable competitors and his own self-doubt. He had to prove himself in training, not just on race day. Coming into the 2002 World Championships, Price heard that a former Olympic coxswain was going to challenge him for the position. “He was more experienced,” Price recalls. “The pressure was starting to wear me down mentally. The coach [Mike Spracklen] was riding me hard. I couldn’t do anything right.” He took the criticism personally—until he read a book by 1996 U.S. Olympic coxswain Steven Segaloff, whose success owed much to Spracklen’s goading. The book awakened childhood memories of suffering alongside other kids, some of whom did not survive. At a crisis in his life as an athlete, Price told himself, “You’re not alone. Other people have had it just as bad or worse.” Two weeks later, in a first for Canada, the men’s eight were world champions, with Price as their cox and leader.

On his path from the hospital bed to the top of his sport, Price showed more than exceptional tenacity. Like other optimists, including the most hopeful respondents in the RBC survey, he found pleasure in every day (too sick to go to school, he would paint or make bracelets in the hospital crafts room). When things got tough, he drew strength from other people. They ranged from the teacher who sent him a cassette of the whole class wishing him well to the rowing buddies who helped him overcome discouragement. Optimists treasure their relationships, and this gives them a lifelong edge.

Retired from rowing since 2013, Price combines a part-time job in RBC’s corporate donations department with motivational speaking and raising two girls, ages five and seven. When his older daughter struggled on the soccer field, Price encouraged her to keep trying. “She practiced and she enjoyed the camaraderie, and as she kept practicing, she got better at soccer. Even if you’re not good at a sport, it’s a chance to be around people.” In the Price family, optimism is catching.

Profiles in Optimism

A Mentor for Future Optimists



Ron Suzuki and Yan Yee

No one had ever taught eight-year-old Yan Yee not to take rides from strangers. As a new day camper at Strathcona Community Centre in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, she wandered away from her group and hopped into a car with a group of smooth-talking young toughs who had been idling outside. A staffer pulled her out just in time, but it was the Centre's guiding spirit, recreation programmer Ron Suzuki, who had to bring her up to speed on an essential safety rule. She pushed back hard. "This is not about me being mean," he remembers saying. "You could have been hurt."

In a lifetime of working with kids, Suzuki has learned a thing or two about rebels like Yan Yee. They might appear to be tuning him out, but nothing lights the spark of optimism like an adult's consistent attention. Suzuki's team understands the art of attention. When he and his

colleagues take the time to bond with children, working in partnership with teachers, they find that each child has a passion. By nurturing that passion, they help each child find a sense of purpose. Some kids shine at music or drama, others at cooking. Yan Yee's passion was basketball. In grade seven she led her team to the city championship, where they placed first out of 93 schools. Her confidence flowered. "All the other girls respected her and gave her the confidence to lead," recalls Suzuki. The child who would not follow rules became a captain who looked out for teammates, passing on to others the attention he had shown to her. When he saw her give her snack to a player who looked hungry, he knew she was following his mantra: "Give more, expect less." At 16 she landed her first paying job at Strathcona—coaching younger players.

Strathcona is a village that looks out for its own, from infancy to old age, with children's programming a point of pride. In one of Canada's poorest and most ethnically diverse neighbourhoods, where more than half of families have a lone parent in charge, it is the year-round haven for kids craving anything from a trip to the swimming pool to a hot meal. Art classes and music lessons, undreamed-of luxuries at home, keep Strathcona humming with excitement. Led by Suzuki and funded by RBC since 1999, these initiatives reflect the commitment of staff, teachers in partner schools and 40 volunteer leaders every year, all graduates of the program. "The volunteers know they're not just following orders," says Suzuki. "They're role models for children who might not have a father at home. We tell them, 'You're completing life for these children between nine and three.'"

At 62, Suzuki likes to say that he has hundreds of sons and daughters (he has no children of his own). Former volunteer leaders at Strathcona, they have all gone on to post-secondary education, where they are training for careers in the helping professions.

Yan Yee typifies their generous spirit. Now 24 and a future social worker, the former rebel is a straight-A student at Langara College (not bad for a young woman who earned such poor marks in high school that the principal thought she had a learning disability). In her spare time, she is working on an extra-special graduation gift for grade seven students at the adjoining school—the classy outfits that their parents cannot afford. Yan Yee has teamed up with a UBC student to create a new initiative that will dress kids up for their big day. To Suzuki, she is proof that "we're training not just great leaders but amazing citizens. If every kid could become as caring as she is, what a wonderful world this would be."



This report is also available in French at www.rbc.com/jeunes. The RBC Youth Optimism Study contains a wealth of data beyond the scope of this white paper. You can read the entire study at www.rbc.com/kids.