

What is 'resilience' and how can we foster this in children?

Resilience is the ability to adapt to adversity and cope with living in spite of stresses. It enables people to face, overcome and be strengthened by the adversities which affect us all from time to time.

Resilience develops at a very young age. It is directly linked to happiness, contentment and success in later life. Early childhood experiences significantly impact the development of resilience.

Children who are resilient are hopeful and possess high self-worth. They feel special and appreciated. They have learned to set realistic goals and expectations. They have developed the ability to solve problems and make decisions and thus are more likely to view mistakes, hardships and obstacles as challenges to confront rather than as stressors to avoid.

Resilient children are also aware of their weaknesses and vulnerabilities but recognize their strengths and talents. They have developed effective interpersonal skills with peers and adults and are able to seek out assistance and nurturance in appropriate ways. They focus on the aspects of their lives over which they have control rather than those over which they have little or no influence.



A longitudinal study of children in highly abusive environments found that the resilient children in those environments had the following characteristics:

1. They each had a charismatic adult in their lives who made them feel safe, valued and listened to.
2. They were all competent socially and emotionally – ie they were good at naming and recognising others' feelings, good at managing their anger and good at resolving conflicts.
3. They each had a sense of meaning, purpose and belonging. They all realised that they are part of something bigger than themselves. For some this was religion. For others it was a deep passion in a sport, a community or a cause.
4. They engaged often in positive self-talk.
5. They all found an island of competence. They found something that they were good at and pre-occupied their days (outside of school or their normal environment).

Needless to say building resilience in children is critical. It enables children to bounce back and adapt to all kinds of adversity, including trauma, tragedy, threats, setbacks and stress. All children at some time in their lives will experience stress and trauma, but by building resilience, are better able to manage this stress and the associated feelings of anxiety and uncertainty.



How can we foster resilience....

Some ideas for babies and toddlers:

- Provide safety, security, stability and nurture – physically, verbally and emotionally.
- Rock, stroke, soothe and cuddle often.
- Use words of comfort to calm.
- Allow babies freedom to explore and play in safety.
- Encourage toddlers to calm themselves.
- Model optimistic and resilient behaviour.
- Talk with toddlers and preschoolers about what adversity and setbacks mean.
- Reinforce a child's faith in their own problem solving skills.
- Set limits and clear boundaries for behaviour and label the behaviour, not the child.
- Offer explanations regarding rules and discipline.
- Praise the accomplishment of tasks and milestones.
- Encourage independence.
- Help your child to recognise feelings and develop language to express emotions.
- Build on the security of trusted relationships.
- Source appropriate picture books from your local library.
- Know and work with your child's temperament.
- Help your child stick to a daily routine.

Some ideas for preschoolers and older children:

- Communicating effectively and listening actively.
- Give unconditional support, nurture and encouragement.
- Loving our children in ways that help them feel special and appreciated.

- Be empathetic.
- Meaningful involvement with positive adults.
- Encourage and help your child practise calming strategies.
- Model self-esteem, confidence and optimism.
- Talk about appropriate behaviours.
- Encourage independent thoughts and action.
- Build on developing an emotional vocabulary and teach how to label feelings.
- Help your child to understand their own temperament and why they might react in a certain way to a particular situation.
- Teaching children to solve problems and make decisions.
- Practise effective ways to resolve conflict at school or in the playground.
- Talk about ways that a child can seek help and assistance if needed.
- Spend time every day talking, discussing and sharing what's happening in your child's life.
- Model and teach attitudes of empathy and ways of caring.
- Explain that all behaviour has consequences.
- Minimise stress and provide comfort in stressful situations.
- Praise completed tasks, work well done, perseverance, desired behaviours.
- Accepting our children for who they are and helping them set realistic expectations and goals.
- Helping our children experience success by identifying and reinforcing their competencies
- Helping children recognize that mistakes are experiences from which to learn.
- Discuss accepting responsibility for behaviour and why discipline is imposed to limit some behaviours.
- Clarify expectations, rules and regulations (especially for school).
- Discipline in a way that promotes self-discipline and self-worth.
- Accept that failure happens and talk about ways your child can overcome feelings of failure and try again.
- Discuss and support emerging independence and autonomy as your child develops, and how this balances out with age-appropriate limitations.
- Be flexible with routines so that your child has time and opportunity to be creative.

- Teach your child how to focus on something else if they are worried or upset.
- Discuss what it means to be a friend and help your child to make friends.
- Explain the importance of eating properly, resting, exercising and self care.
- Help your child to see that their individual accomplishments contribute to the wellbeing of the family as a whole.

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