

Resilience Guide for Parents and Teachers

Introduction

We tend to idealize childhood as a carefree time, but youth alone offers no shield against the emotional hurts and traumas many children face. Children can be asked to deal with problems ranging from adapting to a new classroom to bullying by classmates or even abuse at home. Add to that the uncertainties that are part of growing up, and childhood can be anything but carefree. The ability to thrive despite these challenges arises from the skills of resilience.

The good news is that resilience skills can be learned.

Building resilience -- the ability to adapt well to adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or even significant sources of stress -- can help our children manage stress and feelings of anxiety and uncertainty. However, being resilient does not mean that children won't experience difficulty or distress. Emotional pain and sadness are common when we have suffered major trauma or personal loss, or even when we hear of someone else's loss or trauma.

10 Tips for building resilience in children and teens

We all can develop resilience, and we can help our children develop it as well. It involves behaviors, thoughts and actions that can be learned over time. Following are tips to building resilience.

1. Make connections

Teach your child how to make friends, including the skill of empathy, or feeling another's pain. Encourage your child to be a friend in order to get friends. Build a strong family network to support your child through his or her inevitable disappointments and hurts. At school, watch to make sure that one child is not being isolated. Connecting with people provides social support and strengthens resilience. Some find comfort in connecting with a higher power, whether through organized religion or privately and you may wish to introduce your child to your own traditions of worship.

2. Help your child by having him or her help others

Children who may feel helpless can be empowered by helping others. Engage your child in age-appropriate volunteer work, or ask for assistance yourself with some task that he or she can master. At school, brainstorm with children about ways they can help others.

3. Maintain a daily routine

Sticking to a routine can be comforting to children, especially younger children who crave structure in their lives. Encourage your child to develop his or her own routines.

4. Take a break

While it is important to stick to routines, endlessly worrying can be counter-productive. Teach your child how to focus on something besides what's worrying him. Be aware of what your child is exposed to that can be troubling, whether it be news, the Internet, or overheard

conversations, and make sure your child takes a break from those things if they trouble her. Although schools are being held accountable for performance on standardized tests, build in unstructured time during the school day to allow children to be creative.

5. Teach your child self-care

Make yourself a good example, and teach your child the importance of making time to eat properly, exercise and rest. Make sure your child has time to have fun, and make sure that your child hasn't scheduled every moment of his or her life with no "down time" to relax. Caring for oneself and even having fun will help your child stay balanced and better deal with stressful times.

6. Move toward your goals

Teach your child to set reasonable goals and then to move toward them one step at a time. Moving toward that goal - even if it's a tiny step - and receiving praise for doing so will focus your child on what he or she has accomplished rather than on what hasn't been accomplished, and can help build the resilience to move forward in the face of challenges. At school, break down large assignments into small, achievable goals for younger children, and for older children, acknowledge accomplishments on the way to larger goals.

7. Nurture a positive self-view

Help your child remember ways that he or she has successfully handled hardships in the past and then help him understand that these past challenges help him build the strength to handle future challenges. Help your child learn to trust himself to solve problems and make appropriate decisions. Teach your child to see the humor in life, and the ability to laugh at one's self. At school, help children see how their individual accomplishments contribute to the wellbeing of the class as a whole.

8. Keep things in perspective and maintain a hopeful outlook

Even when your child is facing very painful events, help him look at the situation in a broader context and keep a long-term perspective. Although your child may be too young to consider a long-term look on his own, help him or her see that there is a future beyond the current situation and that the future can be good. An optimistic and positive outlook enables your child to see the good things in life and keep going even in the hardest times. In school, use history to show that life moves on after bad events.

9. Look for opportunities for self-discovery

Tough times are often the times when children learn the most about themselves. Help your child take a look at how whatever he is facing can teach him "what he is made of." At school, consider leading discussions of what each student has learned after facing down a tough situation.

10. Accept that change is part of living

Change often can be scary for children and teens. Help your child see that change is part of life and new goals can replace goals that have become unattainable. In school, point out how

students have changed as they moved up in grade levels and discuss how that change has had an impact on the students.

Resilience and pre-school children

Very young children will only recently have mastered the skills of walking and talking, and they may not be able to express their anxieties and fears. Although you may think they are too young to understand what is happening, even very young children can absorb frightening events from the news or from conversations they overhear.

Watch your children for signs of fear and anxiety they may not be able to put into words. Have your children become extra clingy, needing more hugs and kisses than usual? Have your children started wetting the bed or sucking their thumb after you thought they had outgrown that behavior? They may be feeling the pressure of what is going on in the world around them. Use play to help your children express their fears and encourage them to use art or pretend games to express what they may not be able to put into words.

Use your family like a security blanket for your children: wrap them up in family closeness and make sure your children have lots of family time. During times of stress and change, spend more time with your children playing games, reading to them, or just holding them close.

Young children especially crave routine and rituals. If bedtime is the time you read stories to your children, make sure you keep that time for stories. Your child may be less able to handle change when he or she is going through a particularly rough time.

Resilience and elementary school children

Elementary school children may be starting to bump into the cliques and teasing that can occur as children begin to establish the "social order" of their schools. As they start to study subjects about the world outside of their homes, they look to teachers as well as to parents to make them feel safe and to help sort it all out.

Make sure your child has a place he or she feels safe, whether that is home or school (ideally, both would feel safe).

Talk to your children. When they have questions, answer them honestly but simply and with reassurance that includes black-and-white statements that leave no room for doubt, such as "I will always take care of you." Don't discount their fears when they bring them to you.

When there is a situation outside of the home that is frightening, limit the amount of news your children watch or listen to. You don't need to hide what's happening in the world from your children, but neither do they have to be exposed to constant stories that fuel their fears.

Realize that extra stresses may heighten normal daily stresses. Your children might normally be able to handle a failed test or teasing, but be understanding that they may respond with anger or bad behavior to stress that normally wouldn't rattle them. Reassure them that you just expect them to do their best.

Resilience and middle school children

Even without larger traumas, middle school can be an especially difficult time for many children as they struggle to meet extra academic demands and avoid new social pitfalls. They look to teachers and friends as well as to parents to make them feel safe.

Reinforce empathy and help your child keep perspective. When your child is a victim of the shifting social alliances that form in middle school, help him or her understand that other children may be feeling just as lonely and confused, and help her see beyond the current situation - alliances that shift one way may shift back again the next week in middle school.

Talk with your child about your own feelings during times of extraordinary stress such as the death of a loved one. Your children probably are old enough to appreciate some gray areas in your own feelings, but you should leave no room for doubt when you talk about how you will do whatever it takes to keep them safe. If your family does not have a plan in place for emergencies, make one and share it with your child so he knows that there are decisive actions he can take in an emergency.

Enlist your children's help, whether it's a chore or an opinion about a family activity. Include your children in any volunteer activity you do. Make sure your children know how their actions contribute to the entire family's well-being. If your children know that they have roles to play, and that they can help, they will feel more in control and more confident.

Resilience and high schoolers

Although your teens may tower over you, they still are very young and can keenly feel the fear and uncertainty of both the normal stresses of being a teen, as well as events in the world around them. Emotions may be volatile and close to the surface during the teen years and finding the best way to connect to your teen can be difficult.

Talk with your teens whenever you can, even if it seems they don't want to talk to you. Sometimes the best time to talk may be when you are in the car together; sometimes it may be when you are doing chores together, allowing your teens to focus on something else while they talk. When your teens have questions, answer them honestly but with reassurance. Ask them their opinion about what is happening and listen to their answers.

Make your home a safe place emotionally for your teens. In high school, taunting and bullying can intensify -- home should be a haven, especially as your teen encounters more freedoms and choices and looks to home to be a constant in his or her life. Your children may prefer to be with their friends rather than spend time with you, but be ready to provide lots of family time for them when they need it and set aside family time that includes their friends.

When stressful things are happening in the world at large, encourage your teen to take "news breaks," whether he or she is getting that news from the television, magazines or newspapers, or the Internet. Use the news as a catalyst for discussion. Teens may act like they feel immortal, but at bottom they still want to know that they will be all right and honest discussions of your fears and expectations can help your high schooler learn to express his own fears. If your teen struggles with words, encourage him or her to use journaling or art to express emotions.

Many teens are already feeling extreme highs and lows because of hormonal levels in their bodies; added stress or trauma can make these shifts seem more extreme. Be understanding but firm when teens respond to stress with angry or sullen behavior. Reassure them that you just expect them to do their best.

The journey of resilience

Developing resilience is a personal journey and you should use your knowledge of your own children to guide them on their journey. An approach to building resilience that works for you or your child might not work for someone else. If your child seems stuck or overwhelmed and unable to use the tips listed above, you may want to consider talking to someone who can help, such as a psychologist or other mental health professional. Turning to someone for guidance may help your child strengthen resilience and persevere during times of stress or trauma. Information contained in this brochure should not be used as a substitute for professional health and mental health care or consultation. Individuals who believe they may need or benefit from care should consult a psychologist or other licensed health/mental health professional.

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