

Building Resilience in Our Children

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Resilience is a concept that is often discussed in the aftermath of a trauma yet few parents may know what this term really means or how to promote it. Resilience is the ability to bounce back *quickly* and *effectively* after a crisis. It was once believed that a person either had resilience or did not. Now, we understand that resilience can be enhanced and learned. In other words, all of us have the capacity to be resilient. Resilience can be built at any time. It can help in the aftermath of a crisis and it can help children face adversities that they may encounter in the future. There are factors and actions which can increase the resilience of our children and our own resilience.

Connections are important for resilience. Connections come in different forms, but, overall, include our positive interactions with others. Children who share similar values, beliefs, and ideals with their parents or other caregivers are more resilient. Children can also increase resilience through connections with others, including friends, teachers, faith-based and cultural groups, and extracurricular coaches and peers. Did you know that if a child has a positive connection with even one caring adult, the child's resilience will be stronger in the event of a crisis or traumatic event? To increase connectedness, consider ways to increase your child's involvement with others, including family. Family dinners or family activities are one way to increase connectedness. With families often spread across the country, consider a regular call or letter to relatives, sharing information about activities and small accomplishments. Be connected with your child's school. Read the newsletters, attend parent-teacher conferences, and support your child's school activities. Remember, connections work both ways; inform your child's school personnel about any important events, including stressors, in your child's life so they can respond appropriately to your child's needs. All too often, families reduce their connections with schools as children grow older. It takes on-going involvement to maintain connections with school, which can continue through college. If your child is in college, stay informed about events and activities on the campus through regular contact with your child as well as reading about events on-line or in college newsletters.

Closely associated with connectedness is another important factor for enhanced resilience—participation. Participation can be defined as an active involvement in groups or organizations. Participation can include involvement in school based activities, faith and culture based organizations, or other extracurricular activities. As children participate, they build resilience through feelings of actively making a difference and building connections. Parents who actively participate in programs designed to address issues in their children's lives (e.g., trauma programs, violence prevention programs, and learning programs) report improvement in their children's behaviors as well as grades. Encourage your child to participate with groups that are associated with a shared interest. These may include sports, dance, youth groups, scouts, or other such structured organized activities. Sometimes, following a crisis, children may withdraw from involvement with family and activities they once enjoyed. Encourage participation as it is often this very

participation that will lead to increased positive feelings. The positive feelings can be associated with a positive outlook, another contributing factor for resilience.

We have all heard that routine is important after a crisis. Routine is also a factor in building and enhancing resilience. Structure in the lives of children is critical in a variety of contexts, including home, school, and extracurricular activities. Setting expectations for children is part of structure and routine. Children quickly learn what is expected in school and work to meet these expectations. Interestingly, when schools set high standards for students, students will generally work to meet these standards, creating a more positive sense of self and what they can accomplish. This contributes to building resilience. Structure in extracurricular activities and knowing responsibilities related to these add to building resilience. Home is no different. When children understand their responsibilities, they are more resilient. Therefore, it is important to involve your child in family chores and set clear rules around acceptable behaviors. When crises happen, our general inclination is to relax structure, routine, and responsibilities for our children. In fact, maintaining a semblance of structure and responsibility, even if not at the same level, increases a sense of security and can contribute to resilience in the face of adversity.

All parents understand how important support and nurturance are for building self-esteem. These factors are also important to building resilience. It is important for children to see adults in their lives as taking an interest in their overall development, including emotional well-being. Look for opportunities to encourage and praise your child for meeting small goals, for behaving appropriately, for treating others with kindness and respect. Each time you support your child, you build resilience. Know that life is about change, some positive and some much more challenging. When children are faced with adverse situations and events, such as September 11, 2001, extra support and nurturance are needed. It is common for children to have a decline in school performance and to have more difficulty mastering new material and attending to school work, homework, and chores as they did before the crisis. Although expectations can be adapted, these should be maintained (for example, a child may still have math assignments to complete, but instead of 50 problems, the assignment may be only 25; a child has three daily chores to do before the crisis; in the aftermath of a crisis, she may reduce this to one or two). Parents may need to offer additional attention, help more than usual with homework and other activities, be a bit more patient, and remind their children how much they are loved (even teenagers and college students who may put on a front of wanting to be completely independent benefit from this). Did you know that when we help others, even when we are having difficulties, we can enhance our resilience? Find ways for your child to reach out to others. Thinking of others and providing small acts of kindness not only can contribute to a more positive view of the world around them, but can truly enhance resilience.

Two additional factors related to building resilience are critical reflection and building coping skills. The first entails self-evaluation of how prior situations were handled. Although the severity of the crisis such as 9/11 was unprecedented in your child's life, identify other difficult situations that your child successfully managed. These may include fights with best friends, not being selected for a team, activity, or office, or a death of a loved one due to non-traumatic circumstances. Identify ways your child was successful in overcoming the difficulties presented by each event. Reinforce your child's

abilities not only to handle these situations, but also praise his or her willingness to ask for and accept help when needed or offered. What did your child like about how the situation was handled? What does your child wish had been done differently? Consider how this information and critical reflection can be used to address current stressors. Learning from the past builds your child's resilience for the future. Skill building involves learning ways to effectively manage symptoms that may arise in the aftermath of a crisis. One of the most common symptoms present in the aftermath of a crisis or trauma is anxiety. Did you know that you can not be relaxed and tense at the same time? It is physiologically impossible. Therefore, learning a new skill (or practicing a known skill) such as relaxation can increase resilience in the aftermath of crisis. Older children enjoy meditation, yoga, and guided imagery for relaxation. Younger children can also be taught how to relax through breathing exercises or muscle relaxation. Other skills that may be beneficial in the aftermath of crisis is learning how to stop intrusive and unwanted thoughts. Or, learning how to consider if the meaning behind the action is realistic or if there is an alternative is an important skill to develop. For example, if children are laughing in the lunch room, does your child first jump to the conclusion that she is being laughed at or about or can she consider an alternative explanation that the laughter is due to a funny joke just told among friends and join in the fun? Once these skills for enhancing resilience are developed, think of times they can be used on a regular basis. Relaxation skills can be used before a sporting event or recital, taking tests, or even giving a book report in class. Conflict resolution skills can be used to manage anger or deal with bullying behaviors. Sometimes, your own distress due to a crisis may make it more difficult to offer the support and nurturance needed. Children will look to you as role models. Seeing that you can cope even at difficult moments is important. You are perhaps the greatest asset your child has in building resilience. Think about learning or enhancing new skills along with you child. In addition to managing your stress related to difficult events, consider how useful relaxation skills would be when driving in traffic or standing in check-out lines when in a hurry. There are programs and tapes available to teach your child (and you) skills related to critical reflection and coping. The coping skills that can enhance resilience are often taught as part of treatment programs involving Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT). Investigate where these resources are in your community; many schools, community agencies, and medical centers offer such programs.

Communication is important to building resilience. Keep lines open with your child. Listen, often to the same stories multiple times. Answer questions in clear, concise ways, keeping in mind the developmental levels of your children. For example, the answers you provide to your teenager will be different to the answers you provide to your six year old. Being available to your child to discuss daily events increases the chances that your child will also seek you out to discuss difficult situations. Sharing important information about your child with others involved in your child's life increases the likelihood that all adults will be "on the same page" working for what is best for your child. Remember, communication is a two-way street. As you provide information, ask and listen to what others say.

Sometimes crisis and traumas can consume our lives. It becomes hard to remember life without the adversity. It colors all of our interactions and our activities. It can become the focus and central feature of all we do. Resilience is enhanced when we

can take a break. This may be “easier said than done.” Monitor conversations. Be sure to include discussions that are not about the crisis, maybe even about fun-filled topics such as latest movies, sporting events, or time with friends. Help children understand that having fun is important and acceptable. Taking breaks also includes activities that keep you and your child healthy: eating right, exercise, and rest/good sleep. Again, being a role model to a healthy lifestyle can help your child see the value in these actions. Through such lifestyle choices, resilience can be enhanced.

In summary, there is much you can do to build and enhance resilience in your child and in yourself. Life involves change. How we handle these changes (the big ones such as the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and the little ones) is what’s important. All of us may have varying degrees of resilience. We may be resilient in some areas of our lives and have more difficulty in other areas. Being resilient does not mean that we do not need extra help and support from time to time. Part of resilience is recognizing this and asking or accepting the outstretched hands. As we build our resilience through connectedness, participation, structure and routine, support and nurturance, critical reflection and building coping skills, communication, and self-care we grow and we and our children are better prepared to meet the challenges of today and of tomorrow.

Additional information on building resilience for children, adults, and communities can be found at www.apahelpcenter.org/resilience and www.tdc.ouhsc.edu/cr.htm

More information about the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement can be found at www.cincinnatichildrens.org/school-crisis