

Building Resiliency: Helping Children Learn to Weather Tough Times

Adversity is a natural part of life. At some point, we all face difficulties, such as family problems, serious illness, a personal crisis, or a painful loss. Being resilient is important to dealing with adversities like these. While most parents hope that their children never face extreme adversity, successfully facing tough situations can actually foster growth and give children the skills to be more resilient in the future.

Most people have a natural tendency to adapt and bounce back from adversity. However, parents can help their children learn to face challenges successfully, whether it is the stresses of everyday life, such as academic difficulties or problems with friends, or severe adversity, such as losing a home and being displaced from normal routines for months. Following are five ways to promote resiliency in your children and help protect them from long-term ill effects of difficult experiences.

1. Think positive! Modeling positive attitudes and positive emotions is very important. Children need to hear parents thinking out loud positively and being determined to persist until a goal is achieved. Using a “can do” problem-solving approach to problems teaches children a sense of power and promise.

2. Express love and gratitude! Emotions such as love and gratitude increase resiliency. Praise should always occur much more often than criticism. Children and adolescents who are cared for, loved, and supported learn to express positive emotions to others. Positive emotions buffer kids against depression and other negative reactions to adversity.

3. Express yourself! Resilient people appropriately express all emotions, even negative ones. Parents who help kids become more aware of emotions, label emotions appropriately, and help children deal with upsetting events are giving them useful life skills.

4. Get fit! Good physical health prepares the body and mind to be more resilient. Healthy eating habits, regular exercise and adequate sleep protect kids against the stress of tough situations. Regular exercise also decreases negative emotions such as anxiety, anger, and depression.

5. Foster competency! Making sure that children and adolescents achieve academically is great protection against adversity. Children who achieve academic success and who develop individual talents, such as playing sports, drawing, making things, playing musical instruments or playing games are much more likely to feel competent and be able to deal with stress positively. Social competency is also important. Having friends and staying connected to friends and loved ones can increase resiliency. Social competency can even be created by helping others.

Protecting our children against all of life’s unexpected painful events is not possible. Giving them a sense of competency and the skills to face adverse circumstances can be a valuable legacy of all parents. Resiliency can be built by understanding these important foundations. The more we practice these approaches; the better able our children will be to weather whatever life brings.

Adapted from: “Resiliency: Strategies for Parents and Educators,” Virginia Smith Harvey, Helping Children at Home and School II: Handouts for Families and Educators, NASP, 2004

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