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HEALTHY LIVING

Building Resilience in Children

The world can be a frightening place. As a parent, I am constantly aware of choices that I make to minimize my perception of fear and uncertainty. Death, illness, divorce, crime, war, child abductions, tsunamis, and terrorism — both here and abroad — have defined an evolving landscape for raising our families. How do we manage to parent from a place of love and understanding, not fear and paranoia?



It's not possible to protect our children from the ups and downs of life. Raising resilient children, however, is possible and can provide them with the tools they need to respond to the challenges of adolescence and young adulthood and to navigate successfully in adulthood. Despite our best efforts, we cannot prevent adversity and daily stress; but we can learn to be more resilient by changing how we think about challenges and adversities.

Today's families, especially our children, are under tremendous stress with the potential to damage both physical health and psychological well-being.

The stress comes from families who are always on the go, who are overscheduled with extracurricular activities, and ever-present peer pressure. In the teen years, the anxiety and pressure are related to getting into "the" college.

In today's environment, children and teens need to develop strengths, acquire skills to cope, recover from hardships, and be prepared for future challenges. They need to be resilient in order to succeed in life.

That is why Kenneth Ginsburg, M.D., MS Ed, FAAP, a pediatrician specializing in adolescent medicine at The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP), has joined forces with the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) to author *A Parent's Guide to Building Resilience in Children and Teens: Giving Your Child Roots and Wings*. The new book provides a dynamic resource to help parents and caregivers build resilience in children, teens, and young adults.

Dr. Ginsburg has identified seven "C"s of resilience, recognizing that "resilience isn't a simple, one-part entity." Parents can use these guidelines to help their children recognize their abilities and inner resources.

Competence

Competence describes the feeling of knowing that you can handle a situation effectively. We can help the development of competence by:

- Helping children focus on individual strengths
- Focusing any identified mistakes on specific incidents
- Empowering children to make decisions
- Being careful that your desire to protect your child doesn't mistakenly send a message that you don't think he or she is competent to handle things
- Recognizing the competencies of siblings individually and avoiding comparisons

Confidence

A child's belief in his own abilities is derived from competence. Build confidence by:

- Focusing on the best in each child so that he or she can see that, as well
- Clearly expressing the best qualities, such as fairness, integrity, persistence, and kindness
- Recognizing when he or she has done well
- Praising honestly about specific achievements; not diffusing praise that may lack authenticity
- Not pushing the child to take on more than he or she can realistically handle

Connection

Developing close ties to family and community creates a solid sense of security that helps lead to strong values and prevents alternative destructive paths to love and attention. You can help your child connect with others by:

- Building a sense of physical safety and emotional security within your home
- Allowing the expression of all emotions, so that kids will feel comfortable reaching out during difficult times
- Addressing conflict openly in the family to resolve problems
- Creating a common area where the family can share time (not necessarily TV time)
- Fostering healthy relationships that will reinforce positive messages

Character

Children need to develop a solid set of morals and values to determine right from wrong and to demonstrate a caring attitude toward others. To strengthen your child's character, start by:

- Demonstrating how behaviors affect others
- Helping your child recognize himself or herself as a caring person
- Demonstrating the importance of community
- Encouraging the development of spirituality
- Avoiding racist or hateful statements or stereotypes

Contribution

Children need to realize that the world is a better place because they are in it. Understanding the importance of personal contribution can serve as a source of purpose and motivation. Teach your children how to contribute by:

- Communicating to children that many people in the world do not have what they need
- Stressing the importance of serving others by modeling generosity
- Creating opportunities for each child to contribute in some specific way

Coping

Learning to cope effectively with stress will help your child be better prepared to overcome life's challenges. Positive coping lessons include:

- Modeling positive coping strategies on a consistent basis
- Guiding your child to develop positive and effective coping strategies
- Realizing that telling him or her to stop the negative behavior will not be effective
- Understanding that many risky behaviors are attempts to alleviate the stress and pain in kids' daily lives
- Not condemning your child for negative behaviors and, potentially, increasing his or her sense of shame

Control

Children who realize that they can control the outcomes of their decisions are more likely to realize that they have the ability to bounce back. Your child's understanding that he or she can make a difference further promotes competence and confidence. You can try to empower your child by:

- Helping your child to understand that life's events are not purely random and that most

things that happen are the result of another individual's choices and actions

- Learning that discipline is about teaching, not punishing or controlling; using discipline to help your child to understand that his actions produce certain consequences

Dr. Ginsburg summarizes what we know for sure about the development of resilience in kids by the following:

- Children need to know that there is an adult in their life who believes in them and loves them unconditionally.
- Kids will live "up" or "down" to our expectations.

There is no simple answer to guarantee resilience in every situation. But we can challenge ourselves to help our children develop the ability to negotiate their own challenges and to be more resilient, more capable, and happier.

Overview of Stress

- There will always be stress in our lives.
- Stress is an important tool that can aid in our survival.
- Our body's reaction to stress is mediated through a complex interplay of sensory input—sights and sounds—as well as the brain and nervous system, hormones, and the body's cells and organs.
- Emotions play an important role in how we experience stress because the brain is the conductor of this system. The way we think about stress and what we choose to do about it can affect the impact of a stressful event.

This article was featured in Healthy Children Magazine. To view the full issue, click here (</English/our-mission/Pages/Healthy-Children-Winter-2007.aspx>).

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