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Adapting to ups and downs: helping children build resilience

What is resilience?

Resilience is the ability to adapt to adversity and cope with living in spite of stresses.

Building resilience is building the ability to bounce back and adapt to all kinds of adversity, including trauma, tragedy, threats, setbacks and stress. Children at some time in their lives will experience stress and trauma, but by building resilience, children are better able to manage stress and feelings of anxiety and uncertainty.

Resilience is important because it is the human capacity to face, overcome and be strengthened or even transformed by the adversities of life. And adversity affects us all at some time in our lives.

Resilience checklist

Resilient children:

- find ways to solve their problems
- exercise control over negative thoughts and take responsibility for choosing how to act and feel
- are more likely to have people to talk to and confide in when something worries them
- have inner strength, social and inter-personal skills, and skills in communicating effectively
- require parents and carers to model resilient behaviours and help promote resilience through words, actions and the environment, in which they are being raised
- like to try new things, enjoy a challenge
- need supervision, support and boundaries
- feel they can succeed
- persist with a task and persevere
- have a sense of optimism
- believe their contribution can make a difference to an outcome
- like helping people
- possess a sense of fun.

Resilience can be learned

Resilience draws on aspects of a child's characteristics including temperament and the environment in which they are raised and supported. It also includes people and opportunities that help build resilience, for example independence, autonomy and problem solving.

Strategies for building resilience can be learned over time. Learning to think positively and in perspective means a child can not only cope with problems and setbacks. It also means children have opportunities to learn how to build strengths that protect and promote wellbeing.

To overcome adversity and build resilience, children ideally require:

- unconditional love and acceptance
- some autonomy over their lives
- trusting relationships with significant adults
- feelings of independence
- secure relationships and strong role models to help foster friendships and commitment
- a safe and stable environment
- self-confidence and faith in themselves and their world.

All these things help to build resilience.

Helping to promote resilience

A child's ability to build resilience is dependent on their age and stage of development. Babies and toddlers have limited physical and emotional competence compared with eight-year olds. However, helping a child to feel secure and confident can begin at birth.

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 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 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.
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For preschoolers and older children:

- Give unconditional support, nurturing and encouragement.
- Encourage and help your child practise calming strategies.
- Model self-esteem, confidence and optimism.
- Talk about appropriate behaviours.
- Encourage independent thought and action.
- Build on developing an emotional vocabulary and 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.
- 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.
- Provide comfort in stressful situations.
- Praise completed tasks, work well done, perseverance, desired behaviours.
- Discuss accepting responsibility for behaviour and why discipline is imposed to limit some behaviours.
- Clarify expectations, rules and regulations (especially for school).
- 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.

Resilience is coping with change, and for many young children change can be stressful and scary. Helping a child to keep things in perspective and understand why change is an inevitable part of life, will help them to navigate and bounce back from tough times and move forward to better times.

Wherever possible, ensure that children have unconditional support and stability from their family or caring network.

More: www.asg.com.au/social-emotional