

Resiliency: Strategies for Parents and Educators

By Virginia Smith Harvey, PhD, NCSP
University of Massachusetts-Boston

"Into every life, some rain must fall."
—Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, 1842

As Longfellow infers, everyone faces adverse circumstances at some point in their lives. To a certain extent adversity—like rain—fosters growth. Yet severe adversity—like hurricanes— can be overwhelming at any age, and even some young children face severe adversity. Those who manage to become personally and professionally successful despite severe adversity are called "resilient."

While we marvel that some people overcome seemingly overwhelming childhood adversity, resiliency is actually a normal trait that comes from inborn tendencies to adapt. If people's natural tendencies to adapt are appropriate, then they can overcome even severe adversity. If not, problems can occur.

Developing Resiliency

Since every life contains "some rain," approaches and habits that increase resiliency—the equivalent of umbrellas and waterproof shelter to withstand the "rainstorms" of life—can and should be fostered in all children and adolescents. Approaches and habits that encourage resiliency can be from attitudes and emotions, feelings of competence, social competence, or physical health. Parents, teachers, and other adults can foster children's resiliency in all of these areas. Very often one resilient behavior affects more than one area. For example, regular exercise promotes good physical health and also decreases negative emotions such as anxiety, anger, and depression.

Attitudes and Emotions

Some responses that strongly affect resiliency are positive attitudes, positive emotions, and the ability to appropriately express all emotions, even the negative ones.

Positive attitudes. These attitudes include thinking positively, encouraging ourselves to try, being determined to persist until success is reached, and applying a problem-solving approach when difficult situations are encountered. Positive attitudes reflect a sense of power, promise, purpose, worth, and "self-efficacy." Children and adolescents with positive attitudes are optimistic. They believe that when they try they can learn, achieve in school, and have successful careers. They also believe they are capable

of making friends. Adults play a critical role in helping children and adolescents in developing these positive attitudes. Many successful persons remember specific adults who gave them words of encouragement when they were young, resulting in the development of positive attitudes.

Positive emotions. Emotions such as love and gratitude also increase resiliency. Children need to be cared for, loved, and supported by adults at home, in the neighborhood, in school, and in organizations such as the Boys' Club, churches, synagogues, and temples. Children and adolescents should be praised much more often than they are criticized, and they should have at least one adult with whom they feel able to trust and confide.

Every adult should strive to appreciate each child and adolescent in their lives. Adults should deliberately develop their ability to be sensitive to the needs of each individual child and respond to those particular needs. Children and adolescents who are cared for, loved, and supported learn to express positive emotions to others. Receiving, feeling, and expressing positive emotions buffer children, adolescents, and adults against depression and other negative reactions to adversity. Numerous harmful circumstances are caused by other people—sometimes by accident, sometimes through deliberate abuse or neglect. Learning to forgive others and oneself for playing a part in causing adverse circumstances fosters resiliency.

Forgiving is not the same as forgetting, pardoning, condoning, excusing, or denying the harm that one

person does to another. It is a process in which the person becomes less angry, resentful, fearful, interested in revenge, or remorseful. It is neither possible nor appropriate for forgiveness to occur while the harm is still occurring. For example, a person who is being abused should not try to forgive the offender while the abuse is still occurring. But later, forgiving increases well-being and improves interpersonal relations. In forgiving, an injured person can develop empathy and come to understand even an abuser's needs and motives. Empathy can enable a person to accept imperfections in all people, including themselves. Forgiving persons choose to experience, appropriately express, and then let go of negative feelings of anger, guilt, and retaliation. All of these responses increase future resiliency.

Appropriate expression of all emotions. Resilient people appropriately express all emotions, even the negative ones. Children learn to express all emotions appropriately when adults provide "emotion coaching," which John Gottman at the University of Washington (Gottman, DeClaire, & Goleman, 1998; see "Resources") describes as (a) becoming more aware of emotions, (b) recognizing expressions of emotion as an opportunity for intimacy and teaching, (c) listening empathically and validating feelings, (d) labeling emotions in words children can understand, and (e) helping children come up with appropriate ways to solve a problem or deal with an upsetting issue or situation

Competence

Children who feel competent are resilient. Feelings of competence arise from success in school work or other activities.

Academic success. When children achieve academic success, they face all types of adversity with much greater success. A lifetime commitment to education and learning results from success in school, which in turn results from an academic program that is at a level at which each child can succeed. Every child's school and after-school academic program should be designed so that the child is successful most of the time. In schools, academic success is increased by the use of different types of teaching strategies that meet varied learning styles. It is also fostered by recognizing and understanding cultural and other differences among the students.

Regular school attendance and homework completion. School attendance and completing homework are essential for academic success. Children and adolescents need a quiet time and place to do homework for six or more hours per week. They also need adults to help them when they encounter difficulties with homework. This support can be at home, at school, or in another location such as an after-school care center. All children should be helped to develop a menu of good study strategies and the ability to deliberately choose appropriate study strategies.

Developing talents. Every child should increase feelings of competence by developing talents. Which talents—playing a team sport, hiking, playing a musical instrument, dancing, drawing, art, creative writing, bike riding, computer programming—is less important than the feelings of joy and competence that result. Sometimes a talent leads to a career. More often it results in an improved ability to deal with stress, a source of friendships, a positive method of self-expression, and the constructive use of time. Adults play an important role in talent development by mentoring; that is, by providing encouragement, helping children set realistic and manageable goals, problem solving together, and finding ways to obtain necessary resources.

Social Competency

Positive social competency leads to positive relationships, positive life choices, and increased resiliency.

Network of connections. Connection fosters resiliency at all ages. It is important to "love more than one;" that is, to have several groups of friends and relatives. For example, elderly adults who have at least four different groups of friends and relatives with whom they feel connected, and whom they see regularly, are more resilient and have fewer medical problems. The same is true for children and adolescents. Adults can encourage children and adolescents to develop emotional attachments with relatives, with neighbors, with others who share their interests, and with other members of organized activities. Once a child has developed emotional attachments, it is important to deliberately maintain them. For example, parents who are moving can try to make sure that their children remain in the same schools and activities so their network of connections is not disturbed. If that is not possible, adults can encourage children and adolescents to maintain their network of connections long distance.

Structure and clear expectations. Adults at home and in school need to promote social competence by providing consistent structure and clear expectations; that is, a careful balance of rules that require children to be considerate of themselves and others. Children and adolescents do less well when there are

too many rules, too few rules, or inconsistent rules. They need to know what is expected of them, what behaviors are acceptable, and what behaviors are not acceptable.

Helping others. Social competence and resilience are also fostered by helping others. This can take many forms: elementary students can read to first graders in school, adolescents can work in the town food pantry or help build houses for Habitat for Humanity, young adults can serve as mentors for children and adolescents.

Peace-building skills. These skills, including learning how to be appropriately assertive without being aggressive, also foster resilience. Children who know how to be assertive are least likely to be victims of

bullies. They are also less likely to stand by and observe while others get bullied. And, finally, social competence is increased by minimizing exposure to inappropriate entertainment. Violent TV shows, movies, and video games significantly increase violent responses by children and adolescents. This, in turn, reduces their resiliency.

Physical Health

Good physical health fosters the ability to handle life's challenges because it prepares the body and mind to be more resilient. Adults can foster children's resiliency by helping them eat well. Some foods foster good neurological development, particularly proteins (milk, meat, nuts) and vitamins (vegetables, vitamin pills). Eating a breakfast that includes protein improves school performance, which in turn improves resiliency.

Medical care. Vaccinations, vision and hearing evaluations, and seeking medical care for illness increases resiliency by improving school performance. Short-term medication, such as anti-depressants or anti-anxiety drugs, can be helpful in breaking the cycle of negative emotions. Long-term medications, when appropriately prescribed and monitored for disorders such as bipolar disorder or schizophrenia, are essential for the resiliency of individuals with chronic conditions.

Exercise. Exercise, even walking or bicycling a half hour three times a week, not only improves resiliency and physical health but is extremely helpful for emotional health. Individuals in the habit of regular exercise, and who have a type of exercise they enjoy, are in a much better position to deal with the anxiety, anger, or depression that can result from adversity. Children who are disinclined to exercise on their own can be encouraged by adults regularly exercising with them.

Adequate sleep. Getting enough sleep fosters resiliency. With longer work hours, increased number of activities, and attempts to spend family time together, it can be challenging to ensure that children obtain the necessary 9-10 hours of sleep each night. This problem can be even more severe for teenagers, given the conflict between their high sleep needs, the early time that high school begins, and the demands of activities and jobs.

Positive stress control. Controlling stress encourages resiliency. The most important way for adults to teach children to use positive stress control is for the adults to use and demonstrate positive stress controls, themselves, such as meditation, controlled breathing, yoga, exercise, developing talents, and other "relaxation responses." They do not abuse alcohol, tobacco, or drugs to reduce stress. In addition, adults need to expressly tell children and adolescents what behaviors are acceptable.

Good prenatal care. Resiliency is fostered by good prenatal care. During pregnancy, the mother should eat well, take vitamins, see a physician, practice positive stress control, and avoid diseases, drugs, alcohol, and tobacco. A healthy prenatal environment helps unborn children attain a healthy weight, reach full term, and develop a healthy nervous system and brain. This means the children are less likely to have future health or learning problems, and in turn increases resilience. While we cannot undo a poor prenatal environment once a child is born, all early adolescents should be educated about the importance of good prenatal care so they will provide their own children with good prenatal care. This will increase the resilience of future generations.

Conclusion

Resiliency can be fostered by many different approaches, and can be improved at any age. Not all of the approaches and habits that foster resiliency are necessary, and very few of us can practice all of them. However, the more resilient approaches and habits a child, adolescent, or adult maintains, the better the ability to weather whatever life brings.

Resources

Benson, P. L., Espeland, P., & Galbraith, J. (1998). *What teens need to succeed: Proven, practical ways to shape your own future*. Minneapolis: Free Spirit. ISBN: 1575420279.

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Brooks, R., & Goldstein, S. (2002). *Raising resilient children: Fostering strength, hope, and optimism in your child*. New York: McGraw-Hill/Contemporary Books. ISBN: 0809297655.

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Seligman, M. E. P. (2002). *Authentic happiness: Using the new positive psychology to realize your potential for lasting fulfillment*. New York: Free Press. ISBN: 0743222970.

National Association of School Psychologists, 4340 East West Highway, Suite 402, Bethesda, MD 20814
Phone: (301) 657-0270 | Toll Free: (866) 331-NASP | Fax: (301) 657-0275

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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 affects 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

National Association of School Psychologists, 4340 East West Highway, Suite 402, Bethesda, MD 20814
Phone: (301) 657-0270 | Toll Free: (866) 331-NASP | Fax: (301) 657-0275

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Promoting Resiliency in Your Child

Resiliency is essential to success. Resiliency gives us the ability to deal with life's challenges and adapt to new or difficult circumstances in a positive, productive manner. There are a number of ways that adults can help children become more resilient.

Be loving and supportive. Feeling cared for and safe builds resiliency in children.

Foster positive attitudes. Help children believe that they can succeed if they try. Frame failure as a learning opportunity. Teach them to re-evaluate and adjust strategies that may not be working.

Nurture positive emotions. Demonstrate and give children the chance to practice positive emotions such as optimism, respect, forgiveness, and empathy. Praise them for successes and avoid judgmental or harsh criticism for failure.

Reinforce emotional intelligence. Listen to and validate children's feelings. Label emotions in words they can understand. Teach appropriate ways to express positive and negative emotions and how to problem solve and deal with upsetting experiences.

Develop their competence. Feelings of competence come from success in school and other activities. Ensure regular attendance and homework completion. Help them develop a menu of homework and study strategies. Encourage them to develop talents in activities they enjoy. Teach them to set realistic goals and obtain necessary resources.

Promote positive social connections. Children need a variety of friends, relatives and adults with whom they feel connected. Different people meet different needs and having a social network helps children feel supported and learn to develop and maintain healthy relationships.

Provide consistent clear expectations. Set, explain, and enforce rules and expected behaviors consistently and fairly.

Encourage helping others. Social competence and resilience are fostered by helping others at home, in school, and in the community.

Teach peace-building skills. Learning how to be appropriately assertive without being aggressive, stand up to bullies, and avoid violent games and entertainment fosters resilience.

Ensure healthy habits. Good physical health prepares the body and mind to be more resilient. Help children get good nutrition, adequate sleep, and exercise.

Reduce stress. Controlling stress encourages resiliency. Practice positive stress control strategies such as meditation, controlled breathing, yoga, exercise, developing talents, and other "relaxation responses."

Adapted from "Resiliency: Strategies for Parents and Educators," Virginia Smith Harvey, in Helping Children and Home and School II: Information for Parents and Educators, NASP, 2003.

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