Building Resilience in Children

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Resilience is the ability to bounce back from hard times. We describe someone as resilient if they are doing better than we would expect given the challenges that they are facing. Since we will all face periods of adversity in our lives, having the ability to weather those periods is key to a happy, successful life. So, how do we help our children learn to be resilient?

Let them Experience Challenges

Harvard researchers say "Let your children experience challenges. With the help of supportive adults, this 'positive stress' can be beneficial. Over time, both our bodies and our brains begin to perceive these stressors as increasingly manageable and we become better able to cope with life's obstacles and hardships." When they are struggling, offer emotional support, but also reassure them that even if they haven't figured it out yet, they will. (Offer hints as needed!)

Let them Experience Disappointment

"I looked at my 3 year old's big, sad eyes... I wanted to take away the sadness. [But] as difficult as it is to see my children hurting, I don't do them any favors trying to take away their pain... We learn as we grow that disappointments happen. We need to learn to face disappointment head on. Learning to be resilient... is a challenge. But it's a skill that can be learned. And it's a skill that requires courage. This is the kind of courage I want my children to have." – Amy Miller

We don't ignore their disappointment – we just don't *rescue* them from it. We validate it and help them build the skills to cope with it. They'll learn sadness doesn't last forever.

Help them Learn to Manage Anxiety

Researchers at Yale have found that when children are experiencing anxiety, our natural impulse is to protect them. It's tempting to say 'I hear that it's really scary... you don't have to do it if you don't want to.' These sorts of accommodations actually make anxiety worse – they reinforce that this thing must be *really* scary if caring adults think they can't handle it. Instead, the recommendation is to validate the fear, and then help them build a baby-step plan for tackling their monsters. Say: 'It's OK to feel scared. Let's make a plan for how do it anyway.'

Let them Take Risks and Experience Consequences

It's important to let kids engage in some minor risk-taking behaviors (climbing up high, riding a bike really fast, rough and tumble play), even if there's a chance of some bumps and bruises.

"Risk teaches children how to fail and try again, test their limits and boundaries, become resilient and acquire coping skills... Accidents happen – kids fall and skin their knees... And as tragic as it is in that moment, it's through that experience that they learn perseverance, they learn determination. They dust themselves off and go try something again and they can overcome it." Darel Hammond, CEO of KaBOOM!

We can also let our kids experience physical discomfort sometimes – playing outside on a cold day, going on long hikes that tire us out, getting caught in rainstorms, walking to the store on a super hot day. They learn that they can choose to whine about it and make it worse. Or they can choose to accept it and not stress about it, and then it's not so miserable.

Teach Grit and a Growth Based Mindset

Encourage them to try new things. Use The Power of Yet: When your child says "I can't do this", then you need to add "Yet. I can't do this yet."

Create a culture where doing things outside your comfort envelope is valued more than getting the right answer. Talk about mistakes and failures as normal parts of learning. Let them know that everyone, no matter how talented, runs up against things they can't do. The ones who succeed are the ones who fail, pick themselves up, fail again and persevere till they succeed.

Let them Make Decisions, Practice Problem Solving

Help your child learn life skills and problem-solving skills. Then give your children some freedom to explore, making their own decisions. Ellen Sandseter says "When they … can take full responsibility for their actions, and the consequences of their decisions, it's a thrilling experience." And one they can learn more from than any experience you are micro-managing.

Tell Stories of People Who Persisted

Researcher Marshall Duke found that children who knew their family histories were more resilient. If the narratives were just about the family's successes, they were not as powerful as if the narratives told about both the ups and the downs… "we had plenty of hard times, but we made it through together." It creates a story for the child that "our people" are resilient.

Re-frame challenges as learning opportunities

Psychologist George Bonanno talks about the importance of how we perceive a challenge in our lives. Re-framing it as a short-term, specific issue to be addressed one step at a time can seem more manageable than if we try to solve it all at once.

Help them build an internal locus of control

Developmental psychologist Emmy Werner found that "resilient children… were autonomous and independent, and would seek out new experiences… they believed that they, and not their circumstances, affected their achievements. The resilient children saw themselves as the orchestrators of their own fates." The way I speak about this with children is "you can't always control what happens to you, but you can always control how you choose to respond to it."

You can use a framework of "I have… I am… I can…" Have them think about what resources they *have*, to tell themselves a positive story of *who they are*, and to think about concrete steps that they *can* take to help improve their situation.