

How to Nurture Resilience in Our Children

by Diane Wood, Ed.S., L.P.C.

In this day and age of youth protests, high anxiety and depression, it's more important than ever to teach our children how to be resilient in challenging circumstances. As I work with many youths in my practice, I find that parents can nurture resilience in their children by helping them develop a variety of skills to build inner strength and resourcefulness. Positive thinking, good communication skills, problem-solving skills and a flexible mindset can go far in building the inner resilience that can enrich their lives.

A child's positive outlook on life may be the most important foundation for resilience; negativity may be the biggest obstacle to it. A negative home environment usually comprises a high level of conflict and criticism while not providing the bonding and empathy that a child needs to build healthy self-esteem. In a negative home, bad news is more important than good news and suffering is the gold standard. But resilience needs a foundation of optimism to survive, so a positive environment is essential. Turning a negative home environment into a positive one is the first step in building a child's ability to bounce back from adversity.

Good communication is important too. For parents, it begins with a calm voice and the ability to hear their child's point of view. It includes using language the children identify with and giving them space to be with their emotions. Parents may decide to be more flexible with family rules, to walk away from conflict or to take a time out to calm down. By modeling flexibility and resilience themselves, parents help their child develop those qualities.

I often ask children to pick two feelings that they most would like to feel.

Their response is usually about happiness and confidence. So I ask them to think of a symbol that represents those feelings. The symbol can be anything, including an animal, an object or a place. One girl shared that she wanted her symbol to be a pencil, because that represented strength and confidence to her. Remind your child to think of a symbol when they need more strength, calmness or confidence.

Helping our children learn to solve problems on their own can help them through the rough times. I often tell parents, "Please do not solve your children's problems for them. They are capable of doing it on their own." When parents take this attitude, it helps the children gain a sense of ownership of the problem, and sharpens their ability to solve problems. As a parent, you can still act as a role model and provide guidance. For example, you can help your child brainstorm a few ideas, and then hand over the responsibility of choosing the solution they think is best.

Every time a child solves a problem on their own, they benefit. It increases their resiliency, confidence and self-esteem. What if their solution doesn't work? They need to go back to brainstorming and choose another. Making mistakes allows them to become more competent problem solvers. When given the opportunity, they do a great job.

The Work It Out Wheel

To help young people start solving problems for themselves, I often use what I call a "Work It Out Wheel." Possible strategies we place on the wheel include: Let it go, talk it out, apologize, take a calm break, compromise and share responsibility.

Let your child create their own Work It Out Wheel at home on poster board or a dry erase board. It acts as a great reminder when the need arises.

Last, to become more resilient in the face of adversity, a flexible mind is essential. Researchers refer to it as a growth mindset, as opposed to a fixed mindset. How willing are we to see things differently? Flexible thinking involves becoming a detective regarding our thoughts. I often recommend kids use an awareness journal to help children examine their thoughts. They can explore questions such as, "What is my thought?" and "How does it make me feel?"

For example, kids often tell me, "I'm worried about failing grades and it makes me feel sad, lonely and defeated." When I ask them what they think good grades are, they often say, "All A's, or A's and B's." So I ask them, "Can you prove or disprove that you need to be worried about that?" And they usually answer with, "I can disprove it, I guess. I make good grades and feel happy, confident and proud." A flexible mindset allows them to reexamine the thoughts that are driving them and to gain a new perspective.

Even if they tell me they can prove that they failed a subject, I tell them they can replace that thought with, "Mistakes are opportunities to grow. I'll set a goal to improve my grade."



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