

10 WAYS TO MAKE YOUR CHILDREN MORE RESILIENT

By Robert Brooks, Ph.D. and Sam Goldstein, Ph.D.

What do most parents want for their children? High on their list are: happiness, success in school, satisfaction with their lives, and solid friendships. In order to reach these goals, our children need inner strength to deal competently with the many challenges and demands they encounter. We call this capacity to cope and feel competent *resilience*. Although the word *resilience* has typically been applied to youngsters who have overcome stress and hardship, we believe that it should be understood as a vital set of qualities for every child. Even children fortunate enough not to face significant adversity or trauma experience the pressures around them and the expectations placed on them.

THE MINDSET OF A RESILIENT CHILD

Resilient children are hopeful and possess high self worth. They feel special and appreciated. They have learned to set realistic goals and expectations. They have developed the ability to solve problems and make decisions and thus are more likely to view mistakes, hardships and obstacles as challenges to confront rather than as stressors to avoid.

Resilient children are aware of their weaknesses and vulnerabilities but they also recognize their strong points and talents. They have developed effective interpersonal skills with peers and adults and are able to seek out assistance and nurturance in appropriate ways. They focus on the aspects of their lives over which they have control rather than those over which they have little or no influence.

There is no one proved golden path to the future. Each child travels through life on a unique road that is shaped by a variety of factors, including his or her inborn temperament, educational experiences, family style, and values as well as the broader society or culture.

However, there are some guideposts that provide principles and actions applicable to any road a child travels. Some of them may seem like simple common sense. But even those that appear obvious require continuous thought and reflection so we don't lose sight of what is truly important in our parenting behaviors. The following is a brief overview of 10 strategies to help parents foster resilience in their youngsters.

- **Being empathetic.** In the parenting relationship, empathy is the capacity of parents to put themselves inside the shoes of their youngsters and to see the world through their eyes. Empathy does not imply that you agree with everything your children do, but rather that you attempt to appreciate and validate their point of view. It is easier to be empathetic when our kids do what we ask them to do, are successful in their activities and are warm and responsive. It is more difficult when we are upset, angry or disappointed with them, but that is when it matters most.

- **Communicating effectively and listening actively.** Communication is not simply how we speak to others. It involves actively listening to our children, understanding and validating what they are attempting to say and responding in ways that avoid power struggles by not interrupting them, by not telling them how they should be feeling, by not putting them down and by not using absolutes such as "always" and "never" in a demeaning way: "*You never help out. You always show disrespect.*"
- **Changing negative scripts.** Every parent can offer first hand examples of when they repeatedly told or nagged a child to do or not do something with little if any positive response on the child's part. If something we have said or done for a reasonable amount of time does not work, then we must change our script if our children are to change theirs. This does not imply giving in to or spoiling children; rather it serves to teach youngsters that there are alternative ways of solving problems.
- **Loving our children in ways that help them feel special and appreciated.** A basic guidepost for building resilience is the presence of at least one adult (hopefully several) who believe in the worth of the child. Such adults need not necessarily be parents. They are individuals who in their interactions with a child convey love and acceptance and help that child feel special; someone with whom a child can identify, and from whom they can draw strength.
- **Accepting our children for who they are and helping them set realistic expectations and goals.** To do this, parents have to understand and accept their child's unique temperament. Acceptance does not mean letting children do whatever they want or not setting limits on their behavior. However, when children feel accepted, it is easier for them to respond to requests and limits because they experience these in an atmosphere of love and support.
- **Helping our children experience success by identifying and reinforcing their areas of competence.** True self-worth, hope and resilience are based on children experiencing success in areas of their lives that they and others deem to be important. Each child has different interests and talents that take time to develop. We need to promote our children's strengths rather than overemphasizing their weaknesses.
- **Helping children recognize that mistakes are experiences from which to learn.** Resilient children tend to view *mistakes as opportunities for learning* while those who are not hopeful often experience *mistakes as an indication that they are failures*. Parents need to set and evaluate realistic expectations; emphasize that mistakes are not only accepted, but also expected; communicate that their children are accepted and loved even when they make mistakes; and serve as models for dealing with mistakes and setbacks.

- **Developing responsibility, compassion and a social conscience by providing children with opportunities to contribute.** We often try to reinforce responsibility simply by giving children chores to do at home. However, almost every child from a very young age appears motivated to help others. Children need opportunities to make a positive difference in their world. Involving them in a charitable work, such as walks for hunger or food drives, fosters self-esteem and a social conscience.
- **Teaching our children to solve problems and make decisions.** Resilient children define problems, consider different solutions, attempt what they judge to be the most appropriate solutions, and learn from the outcome. To reinforce this problem-solving attitude, parents must be careful not to always tell children what to do but rather try to engage them in thinking about possible solutions. When children develop their own plans of action with the guidance of parents, their sense of ownership and control is reinforced.
- **Discipline in a way that promotes self-discipline and self-worth.** This means being consistent, but not rigid; knowing your children's capabilities and not pushing them for unrealistic expectations, relying when possible on natural, logical consequences rather than arbitrary, punitive measures; and remembering that positive feedback and encouragement are often the most powerful form of discipline.

(adapted for *Work & Family Life* newsletter, edited by Susan Ginsberg)