

The Ability to Cope: Building Resilience in Yourself and Your Child



Many families face stressful situations, including parental depression, community violence, and poverty. Adversities like these can be painful for the children in these families. But the hopeful news is that research on children facing such problems has shown that many children show *resilience* and do surprisingly well. **Resilience** is the ability to cope with the stress caused by such challenging situations. You can encourage resilience in your child and develop it in yourself. Remember — even those children who are facing the most difficult life situations do not all turn out the same. But fostering resilience in yourself and your child can help you both feel stronger.

How can I help build resilience in my child and myself?

It is possible to build family coping skills even while living under stressful conditions or during difficult times. The following are tips for fostering resilience. Putting energy into even one of these activities each day can help you and your child.

Take good care and teach self-care: Make time to take care of yourself through healthy eating, exercise, and rest. This supports your efforts to feel strong and teaches your child good habits to last throughout his/her lifetime.

Build a strong parent-child bond: Develop a consistent, loving bond with your child by showing affection and responding to his/her needs. Nurturing your child with warmth and attention can help him/her feel secure and support your own effectiveness as a parent.

Encourage social skills: Teach your child how to make friends. Reaching out to your own friends can give you support and reduce feelings of isolation during times of stress and crisis. At the same time, it can help your child see what it means to be friendly and learn to get along with others by making time for and encouraging him/her to play with children and participate in positive group activities such as sports or clubs.

Maintain a daily routine: Knowing what to expect can be comforting to children and adults. Keep a routine by making sure your child regularly attends Head Start, school, and other positive community experiences. Simple daily rituals with your child such as reading a story each night together before bedtime can also be reassuring.

Nurture positive self-esteem: It is important to build upon your strengths and those of your child. Help your child to trust him/herself and to try new activities. Compliment your child's successes. Encourage learning from hardships. Be patient with yourself and acknowledge your own successes, big and small.





Teach your child to laugh and enjoy life by trying to do so yourself: Encourage your child to have fun, play and to enjoy positive aspects of his/her childhood. Investigate some safe and inexpensive places to go in the neighborhood such as your local public library or park. Getting out can do you both some good!

Talk to your child about the stresses in a way he/she can understand: Parents often believe that if they do not talk about a major stressful situation in front of their child, the child will not know that there is a problem. But children are very sensitive to parental stress and usually sense that something is wrong. Often an unspoken issue is more stressful than one that is out in the open. This does not mean that children should be engaged in adult problems, but they should know when things are tough for you so they can understand that it is not something that they caused. A simple statement like “Mommy is mad at something that happened at work” or “Daddy is sad that grandpa is sick” may be enough. Listen carefully to any

questions your child may have and take care to answer them in a way that helps them feel as safe as possible. Saying “nothing is wrong” is often more stressful for the child than giving him or her a simple acknowledgment that there are tensions.

Focus on hope: Take some time regularly to reflect on the positive aspects of your life. Involve yourself with people and organizations that bolster your sense of hope. Encourage your child to be positive about the future by sharing your dreams and goals with him or her.

Raising your child can be challenging under the best circumstances. If you need help or have questions take advantage of the resources around you: talk to your child’s teacher, other relatives, a neighbor, or professionals in the community. Being a source of encouragement and support can be one of the most important things you do for your child and for yourself.

For more support on this topic, please see the following Family Connections materials:

Short Papers:

Parenting Through Tough Times: Coping With Depression

Self-Reflection in Parenting: Help for Getting Through Stressful Times

Additional Resources

American Psychological Association. “Resilience Guide for Parents and Teachers.” American Psychological Association. <http://www.apahelpcenter.org/featuredtopics/feature.php?=6> (accessed September 29, 2007).



Grotberg, Edith. “A Guide to Promoting Resilience in Children: Strengthening the Human Spirit.” ResilienceNet. <http://resilnet.uiuc.edu/library/grotb95b.html> (accessed September 28, 2007).

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