

# Building Resilience in Children

In collaboration with BRICK Consulting Group

## What is Resilience?

Resilience is a universal capacity that we have as humans to overcome or manage stress or adversity. Resilience is necessary for healthy development and successful learning and for enhancing the individual strengths of children such as social competence, problem-solving, autonomy, and a sense of purpose. We are all born with the ability to be resilient and this capacity needs to be bolstered by our families, schools, and communities. Given that parents are children's first teachers, this article focuses on the significance of parents in building their children's resilience.

## Stress (every day and ACES)

Research tells us that children of all ages experience stress on a regular basis. Understanding stress experiences in children is critical to building resilience. This includes examination of both stressors, defined by stress researchers as events or triggers that require the utilization of resources or adaptation and stress, the emotional and/or physical response of an individual to a stressor. All stressors are not created equal. Some are minor, everyday stressors, like having overloads from school demands or family responsibilities. Others are major life events, like parents getting a divorce. Both elicit stress responses.

When stressors and stress are constant or coping is poor, negative impact on the brain occurs. In children 0-8, a critical time for later health and development, the brain is growing at rapid rates. In addition to key factors such as nutrition and exposure to toxins, children's early experiences with other people and the environment are key to brain development. Research shows that exposure to prolonged stress in children can slow, or even stop, healthy brain development and physical emotional growth, especially when that stress occurs during the early childhood years.

One way researchers define these prolonged exposures to stress is through Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). ACEs represent a group of negative experiences children may face, witness, or experience while growing up.

Specifically, they are traumatic events occurring before the age of 18. ACEs include abuse, neglect, parental mental illness, substance use, divorce, bullying, incarceration, domestic violence. ACEs have been shown to disrupt the development of early brain and nervous and immune systems, and can result in long-term health consequences and increased engagement in risky behaviors across the lifespan.

Despite the potential negative effects that stress and trauma can have on developing children, we also know that these impacts can be buffered by supportive relationships with caregivers. The relationships that children have with adults, such as parents, grandparents, and teachers, can protect them from the potential negative effects of stress. This means that two children can experience the exact same stressor or trauma but the child with supportive, loving caregivers may be less impacted by that stressor, as compared to the child who may have been exposed to harsh, unsupportive caregivers. Family well-being, including parental quality of life and strong parent-child relationships, can increase children's resilience. Indeed, high quality parenting and parental support (e.g., positive, consistent communication, active involvement, consistent structure and discipline) are positive correlates of children's ability to adapt to adversity.

## Parent Resilience

In order for parents to buffer stress and support resilience in children, they first need an understanding of how resilience is cultivated for themselves. There are many activities and behaviors that parents can do to build their own resilience. Self-care is one of these. Parents often believe that self-care is selfish because it takes necessary time away from daily child-and home-related responsibilities and commitments. However, not taking care of oneself can lead to depression and anxiety, as well as physical illness. Thus, self-care is NOT an indulgence. It is a necessity. This is especially true for mothers because there still exists gender inequity in child-rearing (women in general still devote more time than men to housework and child care and fewer hours to paid work).

So what is self-care? We often define this as the occasional bubble-bath, the brief pause to read a magazine, or the weekend outing with a friend. And these are all good. But they may not be enough to fully practice the skill of resilience. Parents can also greatly benefit from regular, daily, and intentional pauses during their days. This could include taking a few deep breaths and imagining a happy place. Such actions have been shown to reduce the impact of stress on the body and increase relaxation. And the more pauses done each day, the better.

Additionally, given that stress builds up and accumulates in our bodies, we can try to eliminate or reframe the cause of the stress. For example, if you are stressed by being stuck in traffic on the way home from work, think about this time instead as an opportunity to listen to your favorite music or a new book on tape. If we can't eliminate or reframe the stressor, we need to work to eliminate the impact of the stress from our bodies through exercise, fresh air, or connecting with loved ones. These actions to engage in self-care and build resilience cannot solely just be once in a while; the true benefits come from doing these things regularly, even if momentarily, throughout the day. With practice and purpose, doing self-care will become a healthy habit, like brushing your teeth. It will become something you "just do".

## Building Resilience in Our Children

In addition to building loving, supportive relationships with their children and fostering their own resilience, which they model to their children, there are a few key strategies that parents can employ to boost resilience in their children. First, parents can recognize and validate their children's stressful experiences and the co-occurring emotions. Children will show that they are experiencing stress in many different ways depending on their age and personality. For example, a young child may show stress by increased frequency of temper tantrums or crying whereas an older child may show stress by increased frequency of arguments or disinterest in doing various activities. It is critical that parents first recognize these individual displays of stress so they can have the awareness to know that support and empathy are necessary. Second, parents can coach children to improve their problem solving, planning, and emotion regulation skills. Children who are given opportunities to solve problems, plan their activities, and work through their emotions with age-appropriate coaching tend to be more resilient in the face of stress or adversity. We know that these skills are built up like muscles--the more you practice, the better you are! Lastly, parents can teach children mindfulness techniques such as meditation and breathing exercises. Research shows tremendous benefits of these techniques for children just like for adults.

## Conclusion

Resilience is a practice, a life skill developed with intentional practice over time. Resilience is necessary to combat the harmful impact of stress and stressors. These skills are developed through everyday interactions and supported by strong relationships. Parents can support relationships through a strong understanding of self-resilience and by helping their children build tools of resilience as well.