

Building Resilience in Children – 20 Practical, Powerful Strategies (Backed by Science)

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All children are capable of extraordinary things. There is no happiness gene, no success gene, and no ‘doer of extraordinary things’ gene. The potential for happiness and greatness lies in all of them, and will mean different things to different kids. We can’t change that they will face challenges along the way. What we can do is give them the skills so these challenges are never able to break them. We can build their resilience.

Resilience is being able to bounce back from stress, challenge, tragedy, trauma or adversity. When children are resilient, they are braver, more curious, more adaptable, and more able to extend their reach into the world.

The great news is that resilience is something that can be nurtured in all children.

Resilience and the brain. Here’s what you need to know.

During times of stress or adversity, the body goes through a number of changes designed to make us faster, stronger, more alert, more capable versions of ourselves. Our heart rate increases, blood pressure goes up, and adrenaline and cortisol (the stress hormone) surge through the body. In the short-term, this is brilliant, but the changes were only ever meant to be for the short-term. Here’s what happens ...

The stress response is initiated by the amygdala, the part of the brain responsible for our instinctive, impulsive responses. From there, messages are sent to the brain to release its chemical cocktail (including adrenaline and cortisol) to help the body deal with the stress. When the stress is ongoing, the physiological changes stay switched on. Over an extended period of time, they can weaken the immune system (which is why students often get sick during exams), the body and the brain.

Stress can also cause the prefrontal cortex at the front of the brain to temporarily shut down. The prefrontal cortex is the control tower of the brain. It is involved in attention, problem solving, impulse control, and regulating emotion. These are known as ‘executive functions’. Sometimes not having too much involvement from the pre-frontal cortex can be a good thing – there are times we just need to get the job done without pausing to reflect, plan or contemplate (such as crying out in pain to bring help fast, or powering through an all-nighter). Then there are the other times.

Resilience is related to the capacity to [activate the prefrontal cortex](#) and calm the amygdala. When this happens, the physiological changes that are activated by stress start to reverse, expanding the capacity to recovering from, adapt to, or find a solution to stress, challenge or adversity.

How does resilience affect behavior?

Children will have different levels of resilience and different ways of responding to and recovering from stressful times. They will also have different ways of showing when the demands that are being put upon them outweigh their capacity to cope. They might become emotional, they might withdraw, or they might become defiant, angry or resentful. Of course, even the most resilient of warriors have days where it all gets too much, but low resilience will likely drive certain patterns of behavior more often.

Can resilience be changed?

Yes. Yes. Yes. Absolutely resilience can be changed. Resilience is not for the genetically blessed and can be strengthened at any age. One of the most exciting findings in the last decade or so is that we can change the wiring of the brain through the experiences we expose it to. The right experiences can shape the individual, intrinsic characteristics of a child in a way that will build their resilience.

Now for the how. Building resilience in children.

Building small humans into healthy, thriving big ones isn’t about clearing adversity out of their way. Of course, if we could scoop them up and lift them over the things that would cause them to stumble, that would be a wonderful thing, but it wouldn’t necessarily be doing them any favors. A little bit of stress is life-giving and helps them to develop the skills they need to flourish. Strengthening them towards healthy living is about nurturing within them the strategies to deal with that adversity. Here’s how.

1. Resilience needs relationships, not uncompromising independence.

Research tells us that it’s not rugged self-reliance, determination or inner strength that leads kids through adversity, but the reliable presence of at least one supportive relationship. In the context of a loving relationship with a caring adult, children have the opportunity to develop vital coping skills. The presence of a responsive adult can also help to reverse the physiological changes that are activated by stress. This will ensure that the developing brain, body and immune system are protected from the damaging effects of these physiological changes. Anyone in the life of a child can make a difference – family, teachers, coaches – anyone.

2. Increase their exposure to people who care about them.

Social support is associated with higher positive emotions, a sense of personal control and predictability, self-esteem, motivation, optimism, a resilience. Kids won't always notice the people who are in their corner cheering them on, so when you can, let them know about the people in their fan club. Anything you can do to build their connection with the people who love them will strengthen them.

'I told Grandma how brave you were. She's so proud of you.'

3. Let them know that it's okay to ask for help.

Children will often have the idea that being brave is about dealing with things by themselves. Let them know that being brave and strong means knowing when to ask for help. If there is anything they can do themselves, guide them towards that but resist carrying them there.

4. Build their executive functioning.

Strengthening their executive functioning will strengthen the prefrontal cortex. This will help them manage their own behavior and feelings, and increase their capacity to develop coping strategies. Some powerful ways to build their executive functioning are:

- establishing routines;
- modelling healthy social behavior;
- creating and maintaining supportive reliable relationships around them;
- providing opportunities for their own social connections;
- Creative play;
- Board games (good for impulse control (taking turns), planning, working memory, and mental flexibility (the ability to shift thoughts to an alternative, better pattern of thought if the situation requires));
- games that involve memory (e.g. the shopping game – 'I went shopping and I bought a [puppy]'; the next person says, 'I went shopping and I bought a [puppy and a bike for my t-rex]'; next person ... 'I went shopping and I bought [a puppy, a bike for my t-rex and a hot air balloon] – the winner is the last one standing who doesn't forget something on the shopping list;
- Exercise;
- giving them opportunities to think and act independently (if they disagree with you and tell you why you're wrong, there's a plus side – their executive functioning is flourishing!);

- providing opportunities for them to make their own decisions.

5. Encourage a regular mindfulness practice.

Mindfulness creates structural and functional changes in the brain that support a healthy response to stress. It strengthens the calming, rational prefrontal cortex and reduces activity in the instinctive, impulsive amygdala. It also strengthens the connections between the prefrontal cortex and the amygdala. When this connection is strong, the calming prefrontal cortex will have more of a hand in decisions and behavior. [See here for fun ways](#) that children can practice mindfulness.

6. Exercise.

Exercise strengthens and reorganizes the brain to make it more resilient to stress. One of the ways it does this is by increasing the neurochemicals that can calm the brain in times of stress. Anything that gets kids moving is stellar, but of course, if you can make it fun that pretty much grants you hero status. Here are some ideas, but get them thinking and they'll have plenty of their own:

- throw a Frisbee;
- kick a ball;
- give a hula-hoop a spin;
- dance stars;
- walk the dog;
- superhero tag (the tagged one stands in the middle of a circle on the ground, a superhero saves them by using their superhero powers to fly with running feet through the circle);
- detective (in the park or backyard ... first one to find five things that are green; or five things starting with 's'; or seven things that could be used for dress-ups; or ten things that smell gorgeous – ready, set, go!).

7. Build feelings of competence and a sense of mastery.

Nurture that feeling in them – that one that reminds them they can do hard things. You'll be doing this every time you acknowledge their strengths, the brave things they do, their effort when they do something difficult; and when you encourage them to make their own decisions. When they have a sense of mastery, they are less likely to be reactive to future stress and more likely to handle future challenges.

'You're a superstar when it comes to trying hard things. You've got what it takes. Keep going. You'll get there.'

8. Nurture optimism.

Optimism [has been found](#) to be one of the key characteristics of resilient people. The brain can be rewired to be more optimistic through the experiences it is exposed to. If you have a small human who tends to look at the glass as being half empty, show them a different view. This doesn't mean invalidating how they feel. Acknowledge their view of the world, and introduce them to a different one. ([See here for more ways](#) to nurture optimism in children.)

'It's disappointing when it rains on a sports day isn't it. Let's make the most of this. What's something we can do on a rainy day that we probably wouldn't do if it was sunny?' The idea is to focus on what is left, rather than what has been lost.

9. Teach them how to reframe.

The ability to reframe challenges in ways that feel less threatening is [linked to resilience](#). Reframing is such a valuable skill to have. In times of difficulty or disappointment, it will help them to focus on what they have, rather than what they've lost. To build this skill, acknowledge their disappointment, then gently steer them away from looking at what the problem has cost them, towards the opportunities it might have brought them.

For example, if a rainy day has meant sport has been cancelled,

'I understand how disappointed you are about not playing today. I'd be disappointed too. What can we do because of the rain that we might not have been able to do otherwise?' (If they're really disappointed they might need your help.) *'You could snuggle up and read a book, watch a movie, play a game inside, walk in the rain, we could cook and throw a pretend party or have a fancy afternoon tea – with very fancy clothes of course, and jewels and fancy shoes and china plates and fancy glasses and maybe even ... a tablecloth – but no forks – we are not eating cake with forks, no way – that's just too far.'*

Let there be ridiculous ideas too. This will let them push past the obvious and come up with something that is beautifully unique. It will also encourage them to question any limits or ideas about how things 'should' be done.

'Maybe we could have a picnic in the rain, or a beach party. Maybe we could paint ourselves with mud, or wash the dog in the rain, or make a bubble bath out there and wash ourselves!' Are there ways they can turn this into interesting ideas.

10. Model resiliency.

Imitation is such a powerful way to learn. The small humans in your life will want to be just like you, and they'll be watching everything. Without pitching it above what they can cope with, let them see how you deal with disappointment. Bringing them into your emotional world at appropriate times will help them to see that sadness, stuckness, disappointment are all very normal human experiences. When experiences are normalized, there will be a safety and security that will open the way for them to explore what those experiences mean for them, and experiment with ways to respond.

'I'm disappointed that I didn't get the job, but that's because it was important to me. It's nice to have things that are important to you, even if they don't end the way you want them to. I did my very best in the interview and I know I'll be okay. That one wasn't the job for

me, but I know there is going to be one that is perfect. I just have to keep trying and be patient.

11. Facing fear – but with support.

Facing fear is so empowering (within the limits of self-preservation of course – staying alive is also empowering) but to do this, they need the right support – as we all do. Kids can be fairly black and white about things so when they are faced with something difficult, the choices can seem like only two – face it head on or avoid it at all costs. But there is a third option, and that is to move gradually towards it, while feeling supported and with a certain amount of control. [See here for the stepladder](#), which explains how to edge them gently and safely towards the things that challenge them.

12. Encourage them to take safe, considered risks.

Let them know that the courage they show in doing something brave and difficult is more important than the outcome. Age-appropriate freedom lets them learn where their edges are, encourages them to think about their decisions, and teaches them that they can cope with the things that go wrong. When they take risks they start to open up to the world and realize their capacity to shape it. There's magic in that for them and for us.

'I love how brave you are. When you try harder and harder things, they might not always work out, but it means you're getting stronger, smarter, braver and you'll be closer to getting it next time.'

13. Don't rush to their rescue.

It is in the precious space between falling and standing back up again that they learn how to find their feet. Of course, sometimes scooping them up and giving them a steady place to be is exactly what they need to find the strength to move forward. The main thing is not to do it every time. Exposure to stressors and challenges that they can manage during childhood will help to ensure that they are more able to deal with stress during adulthood. There is evidence that these early experiences cause positive changes in the prefrontal cortex (the 'calm down, you've got this' part of the brain), that will protect against the negative effects of future stress. Think of it like immunization – a little bit of the pathogen, whether it's a virus or something stressful, helps to build up resistance or protect against the more severe version.

14. Meet them where they are.

Resilience isn't about never falling down. It's about getting back up again, and there's no hurry for this to happen. All of us experience emotional pain, setback, grief and sadness sometimes. Feelings always have a good reason for being there, even if they can feel a little pushy at times. The key for kids is to learn to respect those feelings (even the bad ones), but not let them take charge and steer towards trouble. Sadness and grief, for example, can make us want to withdraw for a little while. It is during the withdrawal that information is reflected upon, assimilated and processed so that balance can be found again. If this is rushed, even if it is in the name of resilience, it can stay as a gentle rumble and show up through behavior, sometimes at wildly unexpected times.

15. Nurture a growth mindset. We can change, and so can other people.

Research has found that children who have a growth mindset – the belief that people have the potential to change – are more likely to show resilience when things get tough. Compared to kids who believe that bullies will always be bullies and victims will always be victims, kids who believe that people can change report less stress and anxiety, better feelings about themselves in response to social exclusion, and better physical health. [See here for the step by step](#) on how to nurture a growth mindset.

16. Let them know that you trust their capacity to cope.

Fear of failure isn't so much about the loss but about the fear that they (or you) won't be able to cope with the loss. What you think matters – it really does. You're the one they will look to as a gauge for how they're going. If you believe they have it in them to cope with the stumbles along the way, they will believe this too. This isn't always easy. We will often feel every bump, bruise, fall or fail. It can be heartbreaking when they struggle or miss out on something they want, not because of what it means for us, but because of what we know it means for them. But – they'll be okay. However long it takes, they'll be okay. When you decide, they'll decide.

17. Build their problem-solving toolbox.

Self-talk is such an important part of problem-solving. Your words are powerful because they are the foundation on which they build their own self-talk. Rather than solving their problems for them, start to give them the language to solve their own. Some ideas:

- What would [someone who they see as capable] do?
- What has worked before?
- Say as many ideas as you can in two minutes, even the silly ones? Lay them on me. Go.
- How can we break this big problem into little pieces?

So say, for example, the problem is, 'What if I miss you or get scared when I'm at Grandmas?' Validate them first, then start giving them the problem-solving language without handing them solution,

'You might miss me. I'll miss you too. It's really normal to miss people you love, even if you're with people you love being with. What do you think might help if that happens?' or, 'What would [Superman/ Dad/ big sister who is practicing to rule the universe] do?' or 'What sort of things do you do here at home that help you to feel cozy or safe?' I know you always have great ideas.'

18. Make time for creativity and play.

Problem-solving is a creative process. Anything that strengthens their problem-solving skills will nurture their resilience. Children are naturally curious, inquisitive and creative. Give them the space and the time to play and get creative, and they'll do the rest.

19. Shhh. Let them talk.

Try to resist solving their problems for them. (Oh but so tempting, I know!) Instead, be the sounding board as they take themselves to wherever they need to be. As they talk, their mind is processing and strengthening. The sparks that are flying up there could shine a light bright enough to read by. Guide them, but wherever you can, let them talk and try to come up with their own solutions. You are the safest place in the world for them to experiment and try new things. Problem-solving is a wonderful skill to have, and their time talking to you, and coming up with ideas, will build it beautifully. Give them the opportunity to explore and wander around their own great potential.

20. Try, 'how', not 'why'.

When things go wrong – as they will – asking kids 'why' will often end in 'don't know'. Who knows why any of us do silly things or make decisions that aren't great ones. The only certainty is that we all do them. Rather than, 'why did you paint your sister's face?' which might lead to the perfectly reasonable explanation of, 'to make it yellow', encourage problem-solving and reflection by asking how they can put it right. 'She's yellow but it's not okay for her to stay yellow. How can you fix this?'

And above all else ...

Let them know they are loved unconditionally. (But you already knew that.)

This will give them a solid foundation to come back to when the world starts to feel wobbly. Eventually, they will learn that they can give that solid foundation to themselves. A big part of resilience is building their belief in themselves. It's the best thing they'll ever believe in.