

Resilience

What do we mean by resilience?

Resilience is about 'bouncing back' from what life throws at us. It is about being strong inside and able to adapt well to changes and difficulties. It is about flourishing in life, despite our circumstances.

If children are resilient they will be able to cope better with problems, they will have better health and they will be happier and more fulfilled. They will also be less likely to develop emotional problems like depression or anxiety.

But resilience is not just something you have or don't have. The good news is that we can help all children to become more resilient. We *can't* protect children from all the things that may cause them distress throughout their lives. But we *can* help children become more resilient so that they are more able to cope with life's uncertainties and problems. And all children, no matter what their background, will have to face problems and changes in their lives. So our support is really important in helping children become more resilient.

It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent. It is the one that is the most adaptable to change.

Charles Darwin

What is a resilient child?

A resilient child can be described as:

A child who works well, plays well, loves well and expects well.

Research has shown that resilient children:

- Have good relationships because they are caring, flexible, can understand others' feelings and can laugh at themselves and situations.
- Are independent, active and confident that they can get things done.
- Have a sense of purpose and hope for the future.
- Feel that they are worthwhile and can make a difference.
- Have support from their families and communities.
- Are expected to do well by their families and communities.

How to help children become more resilient

- Be resilient yourself. Don't pretend you don't have problems - show children that you are able to cope with uncertainty, changes and difficult times and still get on with enjoying your life.
- Don't try to hide your emotions. Children are much more aware than you think and are likely to know if you are pretending. It is important to be honest about how you feel, and this will show children that expressing your emotions is ok.

They could be happy outside but they could be sad inside

Gemma, aged 7

- Don't try to protect children from problems and difficulties. Explain to them that making mistakes and coping with tough times are how we grow to be stronger, more capable people.
- When they have a problem, help them to remember what they have done well in the past or how they were able to solve a problem. Thinking about a past success or achievement can motivate you to find ways to deal with the current problem. You can do this using solution focused techniques.
- When a child is worried about something, help them to think about what they can do to reduce the worry, and not to focus too much on what they can't do.
- Help children to develop optimistic thinking. Optimistic thinking is about thinking positively, and this can help us overcome difficulties and find solutions to problems.
- Show them you care about their friendships. Friendships are very important to children and young people – often more than some adults realise. Try to understand how they feel if they are excited about a new friendship or if a friend lets them down.

Sometimes your mum and dad thinks it's having a little argument, but it's bad, really sad, and they don't understand

Jenny, aged 10

- Help them to make friends with other children and adults. Encourage them to be friendly in order to make friends and to try to really understand other people. The social support that comes from having good relationships is really important for resilience. Relationships also help in developing skills such as communication, cooperation and problem-solving.
- Help them to realise that not everyone has to like them for them to be a worthwhile person. Popularity is not the most important thing.
- Help them find simple things to do that they really enjoy – things that put a smile on their face. When we feel good, our minds become more open to possibilities and solutions.

More information

Research by Professor Barbara Fredrickson and her colleagues has found that people who feel more positive emotions, like joy and gratitude, have better coping skills and see more possibilities in life. The research has shown that this can improve people's health and may even help them live longer. So having fun should come first - it is really important for children's long term health and fulfilment! And ours too!

Fredrickson, B.L. (2009). Positivity. New York: Crown Publishers.

- Spend time with them to show that you care and are supportive. Don't feel this has to be special free time – often the best way to get to know a child is to work with them on a task like cooking or washing dishes or making something together.

Sometimes I have problems and my mum and dad can't see it because they're too busy

Davie, aged 10

- Let them know that they can trust you by, as far as possible, doing what you say you're going to do.
- Give them tasks to do to help out at home, at school or at a club. This will help them to feel that they can contribute and take responsibility. Give praise for a task well done.
- Help older children develop a sense of responsibility for their own lives. Feelings of responsibility increase confidence, which in turn helps us deal with challenges.
- Give children choices. This will allow them to feel responsible for making decisions for themselves. Even young children like to make choices about what they eat or what toy to play with. Be careful not to give too many options though, as this could be confusing for young children.
- Give them opportunities to try new things so that they can learn what they really like to do, and what they are good at and not so good at.
- Give encouragement and praise when they have done something well or tried hard – this will help them feel more confident and more likely to try again.
- Show children you care by really listening to them when they talk. Try to really understand where they're coming from.

Parents don't realise what happens to children: they say "don't be silly, go and play"

Sharon, aged 9

- Give them rules that they understand – children respond well to rules and boundaries but they need to be able to make sense of them. Ask them to help set the rules, and the consequences of breaking them.
- Create security for younger children by having daily routines and sticking to them – like always having the same bed time. This structure in their lives can be comforting.
- Make sure they get enough sleep, exercise and healthy food to help them have the energy to cope with life. Teach older children how to look after themselves too.
- Have high, but realistic, expectations of them. Believe in them – every child is unique, worthwhile and has their own unique strengths, such as kindness, curiosity or perseverance.

Did you know?



A researcher, Roger Mills, who worked with young people from a disadvantaged community, found that saying to a young person, "You have everything you need to be successful – and you can do it" was really important in helping to build resilience against the development of further problem behaviours.

Mills, R. et al (1988). Working with high risk youth in prevention and early intervention programmes: Towards a comprehensive wellness model. *Adolescence*, 23(91): 643-660.

- Help children to find what they are really good at and what their strengths are. Help them focus on these strengths because this will help them feel positive about themselves and increase their confidence to overcome any problems they face. Show them how you use your own strengths to cope with any problems you face.

Activities

Here's an activity you can try to help build resilience in difficult times.

Comfort Menus

Create a special menu together of all the ways you can comfort someone who's sad or upset.

You will need:

- Sheets of thin card
- Pens
- Felt-tipped pens.

What you do:

- Work together to make a list of at least twelve different things you could do to comfort someone who was sad.
- Perhaps they would like a hug, someone to play with them, someone to listen to them, or someone to tell them a funny story. Or maybe they would like a back rub, someone to help them with a difficult job, a mug of hot chocolate, or someone to spend time with them just having fun...
- The list that you write down together is like a 'Comfort Menu'.
- Add 'Something else' to the menu in case anyone needs another option.
- Whenever anyone in your family or group feels sad or upset they can choose what they'd like most from the 'Comfort Menu' that you made together.
- The items on the list can be numbered like a take-away menu, or maybe each person can mark which ones they like the best.
- The menu can be laminated to protect it.

Some things to talk about together:

- Think about a time when someone comforted you in a way that really helped you to feel better. What was the best thing about the way they comforted you?
- When do you think each person in your family or group most needs to be comforted?
- How can you make sure that you're comforting each other in the best possible way?

Other ideas:

- Design an attractive 'Comfort Menu' on a computer. Create a space on the menu where people can show what their favourite comforts are.
- Make a comfort 'quilt' by inviting people to write their favourite ways of being comforted on different squares of lightly-patterned paper. Arrange the squares into a patchwork-style collage and stick them onto a larger sheet of paper or thin card to make a piece of comforting wall art.

Quotes from children are taken from Messages from Children, published by NHS Health Scotland (2008).