Building Resilience in children

What is resilience? Resilience is knowing how to stay calm, being able to stop yourself from getting extremely angry, down or worried when something bad happens. It also means being able to control your behaviour when you are upset so you can bounce back from difficulty.

Teaching your child to be resilient
A vital element of teaching children to build resilience is teaching children that what they THINK affects the way they FEEL. Usually it is not what happens that makes us feel negative emotions, it’s the perception and understanding around the situation that creates our feelings. Two children in the exact same situation can perceive a situation differently and therefore one crumbles and gets down and the other is able to control her emotions and bounce back from a minor setback. This is most often because of the child's thinking skills and habits.

Discuss Ways to Think as well as Coping Skills that will Help Your Child to Be Resilient
Introduce your child to the idea of an Emotional Thermometer and explain that feelings like physical temperatures can go from being very low/weak in intensity to very high/strong: You could explain it something like “When something happens to you that you think is bad like someone doesn’t say hello or you get a bad mark, you can feel extremely upset, medium upset or just a little upset. A resilient person tries to manage her emotions so that she stays in the medium range of upset and when she gets to the top of the thermometer, she calms down quickly.” When you are talking with your child about something that happened at school or home where they were upset, explain that there are some helpful ways they can think about what happened that can strengthen their resilience. One way, is not to let your thinking get the better of you by blowing the badness of what happened out of proportion (making mountains out of molehills).

Things that happen can be truly awful and terrible and other events are just “a bit bad” like being late for an appointment, a bad mark on a test, someone laughs at what you say in class or forgetting to do something. When you are thinking about something bad that happened, it’s good to think: “This is bad but it could be worse. It’s not a catastrophe, the worst thing in the world.” Thinking this way helps you to be calmer and more resilient to a difficult situation.

Habits of Mind that lead to poor emotional resilience:
There is a range of thinking habits that don’t help children to be resilient. If we can identify these unhelpful habits, then it’s easier to help our child think about a situation in a more healthy way. These are some common negative habits:

- **Self-Downing** – means thinking that I am useless or a total failure when I have been rejected or have not achieved a good result.
- **Needing to be perfect** – means thinking that I have to be successful or perfect in everything important I do.
- **I Can't Do It** – means thinking that, when I have not been successful at something important, I am not good at anything and never will be.
- **I Can’t Be Bothered** – means thinking that life should always be fun and exciting and that I can't stand it when things are frustrating or boring.
- **Being Intolerant of Others** – means thinking that people should always treat me fairly, considerately, and the way I want and if they don't then I will get really angry and frustrated.

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Anxiety in Children

What is Anxiety? Anxiety is a normal feeling people experience when faced with threat or danger, or when stressed. Most people including children feel anxious at times and this is perfectly normal. Anxiety presents itself in 3 ways; behaviour, thoughts and feelings. When children experience anxiety they may experience some of the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Anxious Behaviors</th>
<th>Anxious Thoughts</th>
<th>Anxious Feelings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Difficulty sleeping</td>
<td>• Not being able to think clearly or to concentrate</td>
<td>• Feeling anxious or tense</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Restlessness</td>
<td>• Perceptions of threat or danger appear greater than it is</td>
<td>• Irritability, uneasiness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Fast heart beat</td>
<td>• Excessive worry, or ‘catastrophising’, about life circumstances that have no</td>
<td>• Feeling ‘out of control’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Sweating</td>
<td>factual or logical basis</td>
<td>• Fear that something dreadful is</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Headache</td>
<td>• Recurrent and persistent intrusive ideas and thoughts</td>
<td>going to occur</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Nausea, vomiting,</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Feeling dizzy, unsteady,</td>
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<tr>
<td>diarrhoea</td>
<td></td>
<td>light-headed or faint</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Tense muscles</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Feeling upset and uncomfortable</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Difficulty breathing</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

We all experience anxiety at some time during our lives when we are faced with difficulties, faced with challenges or when we are feeling out of our comfort zone. Some children experience anxiety over everyday life activities and this can be incredibly draining and take the fun out of life. **Although feeling anxious from time to time is normal for children, extra support may be needed when:**

- Children feel anxious more than other children of their age and year level and talk about their worries a lot.
- Anxiety stops them participating in activities at school or socially.
- It interferes with their ability to do things that other children their age do easily.
- Children find it hard to separate from parents.
- Children are afraid to take healthy risks and have a go at new things.
- Children need a lot of reassurance before beginning tasks or socialising.
- There is a need for perfectionism particularly with academic tasks.
- There are ongoing physical symptoms such as an upset tummy and headaches.

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Characteristics of Resilient Kids

What is Resilience? Resilience is the ability to cope and stay healthy in spite of the negative things that happen through life. Resilience is being able to cope with life’s ups and downs and to recover well when things go wrong.

Building resilience in children includes 5 areas:

1. Personal coping skills which include thinking in a healthy way so children can put things into perspective and build self-confidence.
2. Interpersonal skill development which includes making friends, managing feelings, dealing with conflict, seeking help and solving problems.
3. Developing individual coping strategies such finding something fun to do, meditating, writing in a journal and using an emotional thermometer.
4. Nourishing the spirit by putting into place a variety of preventative strategies that help to minimise stress such as spending a lot of time engaging in free play and being creative.
5. Providing lots of opportunity for children to make mistakes, deal with problems on their own and giving children appropriate independence.

Characteristics of Resilient People

- Ability to “bounce back” and “recover from almost anything”
- Optimistic, flexible thinking skills
- Have a “where there’s a will, there’s a way” attitude
- Tendency to see problems as opportunities to learn and grow
- Ability to “hang in there” or persevere and persist
- Have a strong authentic self esteem
- Capable of setting clear, realistic and attainable goals
- Have a healthy social support network
- Seldom dwell on the past or the future
- Learn from previous challenges and mistakes
- Able to put things into perspective
- Have a well-developed sense of humour
- Have meaningful involvement with others and in their community
- Treat themselves and others with respect
- Have problem solving and conflict resolution skills
- Values free time, relaxing and spending time on hobbies

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Teaching Kids to be problem solvers

One important area that is vital to help children become more resilient is to help them become ‘problem solvers’. If children can solve their own problems their confidence grows as they realise that they are able to cope with anything that comes their way. If children don’t get the opportunity to solve their own problems, they can form a belief that they are not capable of coping with struggles. Once children solve a problem independently they remember this for the rest of their lives and take this learning to new and more difficult situations. Below is a list of suggestions to help your child solve problems.

HELPING CHILDREN TO BECOME PROBLEM SOLVERS!

- If your child is faced with a problem, sort through possibilities together by asking questions.
- Ask “what could you do?” “What would happen if you did this?...”
- Let them try out possibilities on their own first – give them the chance to try out their solutions even if you know they may not work!
- Treat difficulties as though you are both trying to solve it together.
- Discuss situations together by using reflective listening (“it sounds as though you had a tough day today”)
- Let children discover life through trial and error – this is vital to develop resilience!
- Let children make lots of MISTAKES! We don’t want to protect children from difficult emotions as they need to cope with them at some stage of their lives.
- Step back when mistakes are made. (Only step in if you have to!)
- Give children chances to develop independence by allowing them to make small decisions and larger ones as they grow.

Problem Solving Checklist for Kids!

✓ I try to figure out how to solve problems
✓ I keep going even when things are difficult
✓ I try to resolve conflict with others
✓ I have an attitude where I know that if I work at something I will reach my goals
✓ I learn from my mistakes and plan for the future
✓ I see past mistakes as learning opportunities
✓ I use trial and error to find things out for myself
✓ I treat difficulties as though I am trying to solve it rather than give up or get too upset

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Helping kids to think positively

Helping children to develop health thinking habits is vital and is the foundation of emotional resilience. At times we all think in unhelpful ways that we know makes us feel pessimistic, down or afraid. However if we think this way all the time, we develop thinking habits that impact on our ability to deal with life’s ups and downs. We can help our children become healthy thinkers by modelling positive thoughts and actions. We can point out gently to our children when they are thinking in a negative way (but not giving too much attention) and give loads of praise when we see our children facing difficulties with a positive attitude. Children also look carefully at parents to see how they are viewing difficult situations and in turn develop strategies and beliefs around what they see and hear. Below is a list of unhelpful and helpful types of thinking.

8 Types of Unhelpful Thinking

- **Catastrophic thinking** this is the worst thing in the world
- **Self-Downing thinking** putting yourself down
- **Perfectionistic thinking** Needing to be perfect
- **Needing approval** Everyone must approve / like me
- **Pessimistic** I can’t do it
- **Giving up** I can’t be bothered
- **Being intolerant of others** people should behave as I want them or expect them to
- **Low frustration thinking** everything in life should be fun, comfortable and easy and I can’t stand frustration of any sort

8 Types of Helpful Thinking

- **Perspective Thinking** means thinking it’s not the worst thing that could happen to me.
- **I Can do this thinking** means thinking while this is hard, I can still do it.
- **Accepting Thinking** means thinking that when I make mistakes I am not hopeless and people will still like me even if I am not perfect. I still have my good points.
- **Fearless Thinking** means thinking that it’s OK to make mistakes when learning new things.
- **Independent Thinking** it’s important to be myself and have a go at new things.
- **Confident Thinking** if I really put my mind to this I will be able to do it!
- **Persistent Thinking** we all have to work hard to achieve even though they may not like doing it.
- **Tolerant Thinking** things are hard / frustrating but I can stand it

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Building emotionally resilient behaviour

There are many ways we can help our child build emotional resilience. One very powerful way is to give behaviour specific feedback to your child when you see them behaving or thinking in a resilient manner. Children love to hear specifically what they are doing that is on the right track rather than just hearing generalisations such as ‘well done’ or ‘you did well’. Here are some examples of giving specific feedback for emotionally resilient behaviours:

Ways to praise your child for emotionally resilient behavior:

“I can see that even though you are a bit nervous, you are going to try to do it anyway”
“Even though you are finding this hard, you are not getting too sad about it”
“I can see you are choosing not to get into a fight”
“Good for you, you didn’t let yourself get too angry”
“You’ve learned how not to get too worried”
“You see, you can get through something that seems scary”
“Even though you didn’t know how to play the new game, you didn’t worry and you kept on trying”

Give lots of BSF
(Behaviour Specific Feedback)

Behaviour – the behaviour they are doing that shows resilience and confidence.

Specific – be very specific e.g. “I like the way you went up and spoke to that girl you did not know – that was really confident!”

Feedback – Verbally praise when you see it. You are giving feedback as a “resilience” coach and children need guidance and positive praise when they are on the right path!

Subtle ways of giving feedback
Children need a lot of guidance around all sorts of behaviour and this needs to be constant and consistent. Children look to adults to get feedback on their behaviour even though they may not be aware of this. The feedback they get from you is one of the most powerful ways we can encourage resilient responses to setbacks. Our feedback can be very specific as explained above, but it can also be subtle and just as powerful. If we respond in a very anxious way to small setbacks our children are having the message is clear to children: I need to be anxious about this as well – if mum or dad is worried about this, then I need to be as well. The messages we give our children through our own emotional reactions teach children how to cope with life’s difficulties and they often learn how handle difficulties by observing our own behaviour.

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Friendships & Conflict

During primary school children go through many stages of making friends and along the way will experience conflict at some stage. It is very normal for children to experience conflict from time to time as this a way of children discovering what works with friends and what doesn’t – put simply children are developing their social and emotional skills. Some children may get confused when they have a disagreement or conflict with another person and may call this bullying. There is a great difference between conflict and bullying and here is a simple way to differentiate between them:

- Misunderstanding – usually problems around communication.
- Disagreement – do not agree on something and both want their own way.
- Conflict – people usually want to solve the problem. Can be over a period of time if not sorted properly.
- Bullying – threatening, repetitive, targeted, deliberating wanting to harm, abusive, no attempt to resolve issue

If your child does experience conflict, this is a wonderful teaching moment to guide them and help them learn about how to get along with others. Sometimes children can resolve conflict themselves, particularly as they grow into the upper years of primary, but when they are young they may need guidance and most importantly need emotional support. The best way to give emotional support is to use ‘reflective listening’. When we practice this type of listening, we listen to the content of what your child is saying and listen for the emotion and then we reflect back what they are saying e.g. “it sounds as though that really frustrated you when you did not get to play your game”. We can then try to help them problem solve the situation by giving them lots of opportunities to brainstorm a solution without stepping in too early to solve it for them.

Conflict teaches kids:

- How to give and take
- How to come to an agreement
- How to compromise
- How to solve problems
- That people have different needs to their own
- How to understand others
- How to communicate needs in a respectful way
- To develop more empathy
- How to get along in a group
- How to develop successful, healthy & loving relationships as adults

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Effective conflict management skills

During primary school children go through many stages of making friends and along the way will experience ups and downs with friends. Friendships teach children about getting along, solving conflict, values, empathy, social connection and having fun! There are some helpful ways that children can solve conflict by using assertiveness skills rather than being aggressive or passive. Kids love to learn about ways to behave through the use of fun visuals and the animals below can be a helpful way to explain appropriate ways to treat friends.

Timid Turtle – passive, withdraws, does not speak up, peacemaker, blames self

Loud Lion – aggressive, loud, dominating, considers only their point of view, blames others

Wise Owl – knows when to seek help and when to try to solve it independently

Friendly Fox – considers everyone’s point of view, confident, self-protective, self-aware

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