

ResilientYOU



10 PROTECTING SHIELDS Building Resilience in Children

by Barbara Smith

We all know someone who is resilient; who seems to be able to face obstacles and bounce back time after time. They must have been born with the resiliency gene. Not so. Resiliency is a skill, a way of thinking, and doing that can be taught. Resilience is the ability to overcome difficult experiences and be stronger for it. There are very strategic actions teachers can take to increase children's resiliency. Yes, resiliency can be taught and you are the teacher!

The following 10 resiliency-building strategies can be used by any adult working with children. The examples were directed at parents, but can easily be adapted for use in your classroom.



Cultivate Close Relationships With Children

To be resilient, children need to know the adults in their world have their best interest at heart. Let them know that you believe they have what it takes to cope with challenges that come their way.

Things To try

Show interest in things your child likes to do by participating with them in coloring, building things with blocks, video games or swimming. Do silly things together. Listen to them. Look them in the eye and tell them how you feel. Be in the moment with your children. Turn off your electronics and give them 100% of your attention. When they share with you, repeat back what they say, so they know you are listening. This shows that you are interested in what they are saying. Say, “I love you” often.



Show Children They Are Capable

As your children get better at a task, note their improvement and compliment them on mastering a skill. Encourage them as they work through the process. Tell them it takes hard work and patience to master skills and that you have the confidence that they can do it.

Things To try

Get excited about how they are getting better at what they are doing. As they try different ways to make their blocks higher, or ride their bike without training wheels, compliment them on trying. Let them know you believe they can do it. When they get discouraged, remind them of hard things they learned to do in the past and that you have seen them learn lots of hard things. Tell them you believe in them.



Let Children Experience Challenges

Help children understand that some things are hard to do, but that you know they can figure them out. Let them know that success can come through struggling and that you have their back. Do not rescue them. Let them work it out. This is critical in helping build resiliency. Keep communication open so they can tell you how it is going. If children experience disappointment when they are young, they can handle it better when they are older.

Things To try

If they are in the middle of a hard task, like learning to tie their shoes, let them know you know they can do it. Take a break and come back to it. If they have a hard homework problem, let them talk you through it and then see if they can see a way to do it. Make sure they have the basic skills they need to be able to complete the task. Help them with the skill and then let them get back to the main project. Tell them you believe they can do it. Sometimes if they work hard for something like trying out for a play or getting on a team but it doesn't work out, sympathize with them, but celebrate their effort. Often when one thing does not work out, other opportunities can present themselves.



Provide Children With Service Opportunities

When children are given opportunities to provide service outside their homes it provides them with a new perspective, a sense of community and empathy for others. These are traits that strengthen their ability to be resilient.

Things To try

Find volunteer opportunities your family can do together. Getting out of your home and into another environment can help your children meet new people and help them learn to work with others. It can build their self-esteem and confidence. Within your home, create opportunities for your children to serve the family. It helps them feel needed and appreciated. Also, help them get outside of themselves by reaching out to another who may be in need.



Recognize Children's Efforts

If the only time a child gets positive feedback is if they get an A or win first place, they will do anything to get those—even if it means cheating. Resiliency is nurtured by cheering the effort. What a gift to give your child to be appreciated for trying.

Things To try

Being a child is all about learning new things. If your child is trying to learn to skate, make a big deal about how hard they are working. When they conquer it, be happy for them, but emphasize the great effort. If they are building Lego towers and they fall, talk about how much fun it was to find ways to make it tall. Celebrate the process. Life is a process and learning to enjoy the journey is critical to resilience.



Help Children Practice Patience

Teaching a child patience is like strengthening a muscle. You have to keep working at it. This is one of the most important attributes you can help your child develop. It can affect their careers, relationships and mental health. Needing immediate gratification sets your child up for constant disappointment and stress.

Things To try

Children have limited understanding of time. When you need them to wait for you to finish a phone call or drive to the store, give them time comparisons they can understand such as: it will take as long as singing a song, or as long as a movie. Let your child experience waiting sometimes. Don't try to fill it up with screen time, etc. They need to learn they can wait. Play board games together. Having to wait for your turn is a great way to teach patience. As they get older they start understanding that we all have to wait sometimes.



Teach Children To Be Accountable

Children need to recognize their mistakes, own them and then fix them. (As adults we need to do the same.) Don't let your children be the victim or the blamer. Let them be the captains of their ships!

Things To try

If they try to blame someone, have them tell you what happened step-by-step. When they get to the point where they try to blame, have them stop and analyze what really happened. Let them explain what they could have done differently. If they didn't do something they were asked to do, or did something they should not have, they need to own it and come up with a solution to fix it.



Assist Children In Identifying Their Feelings

If they can say they are mad they probably won't hit their sibling. You can empathize with their feelings whether they are sad, lonely, or frustrated. Naming the feeling helps get it out in the open so they can process it and move forward.

Things To try

Feelings are real. Telling a child that they should not feel a certain way, makes them feel like you do not care or understand. Talk about what they are feeling and empathize with them. Help them express their thoughts and emotions so they can release them and move on. Check in with them later to see how they are doing.



Nurture Children's Creativity

Encouraging creativity and incorporating it into the activities your children participate in will make them more confident of trying unique ideas to cope with stress and challenges. Help them discover there is often more than one way to approach a challenge. Creative people are more flexible and deal better with change.

Things To try

After reading a book, have your child think of different ways it could have ended, or what could have happened if one thing changed in the book. Play games together. Play "build a story" together, each person taking a turn to tell the next part of a made-up story. Give your child things to be creative with: blocks, costumes, art supplies. Don't judge their creativity; just ask them how they enjoyed it. Let your children try things, even if they fail. Fear of failure crushes creativity. Encourage them to keep on trying.



Promote Positivity In Children

Resilient people are generally optimistic people. A child can be taught to be more positive by being reminded of the positive that can be found in most situations. Positive people can get through negative bumps that come their way because they know life is generally more positive than negative

Things To try

Play a game where you and your child find 10 good things that happened that day. Every time your child complains, they have to say something positive. When a child experiences disappointment such as when a friend can't come over to play, find something positive to say like, "now we have time to read a book together". Be a positive role model and make sure your child has positive friends. Share positive stories, watch positive movies, read positive books.

Resiliency can be learned. Life is full of opportunities for these lessons to be taught. Be intentional about helping your children learn how strong they really are and how proud you are of them for not giving up. Create age-appropriate boundaries. Children need order and structure, so their environment is predictable. When they are struggling with hard things, encourage them to keep trying. Helping your children develop resilience is one of the greatest gifts you can give. Teaching them to be resilient will help empower them to successfully navigate the many ups and downs they will face in their future.