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# Resiliency: Strategies for Parents and Teachers

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*"Into every life, some rain must fall." (Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, 1842)*

As Longfellow implies, everyone faces adverse circumstances at some point in his or her life. To a certain extent, adversity—like rain—fosters growth. Yet severe adversity—like hurricanes—can be overwhelming. Those who succeed despite adversity are called *resilient*. Resiliency arises from the natural ability to adapt. If this ability is in good working order, even severe adversity can be overcome.

Since every life contains some rain, habits that increase resiliency—the equivalent of umbrellas and shelters to withstand the storms of life—can and should be fostered in all. Habits that foster resiliency include adaptive attitudes and emotions, feelings of competence, positive relationships, and good health. Often, one resilient behavior or quality affects more than one area. For example, regular exercise promotes good physical health and also decreases negative emotions such as anger and depression. Parents, teachers, and other adults can foster children's resiliency in all of these areas.

## EMOTIONS AND ATTITUDES

Resilient persons appropriately express all emotions, even negative ones. Adults can help children become aware of their emotions, recognize children's emotional expression as opportunities for intimacy and teaching, listen empathically and validate children's feelings, label emotions in words children can understand, and help children devise appropriate ways to deal with an upsetting situation. Positive attitudes and emotions are particularly important in increasing resiliency.

***Positive attitudes.*** Positive attitudes that increase resiliency include optimism, being determined to persevere until success is reached, and applying a problem-solving approach to difficult situations. Positive attitudes reflect a sense of power, promise, and purpose. Individuals with positive attitudes believe that when they try hard, they can learn, achieve, and be successful. They form realistic plans, avoid seeing crises as undefeatable, and accept change and setbacks as part of life. Adults help children and adolescents develop positive attitudes by modeling them and by teaching children to believe in themselves. Many successful persons vividly remember special adults giving them critical words of encouragement such as "I believe you can do it."

***Positive emotions.*** Experiencing and expressing positive emotions serves as a buffer against adversity. Children need to be cared for, loved, and supported by the adults in their lives. They should be praised more often than criticized, and they should have at least one adult they can trust and confide in. Every adult should find things to like about each child and strive to be sensitive and responsive to his or her unique needs.

Many adverse circumstances are caused by other people—sometimes by accident, sometimes through deliberate abuse or neglect. Resiliency is fostered by learning to forgive, which includes the acts of experiencing, appropriately expressing, and then letting go of anger, guilt, and the need to retaliate. Forgiving is not the same as forgetting, excusing, or denying the harm done, and it is neither possible nor appropriate to forgive while harm is still occurring. For example, a child who is being abused should not try to forgive his or her abuser. At a later time, forgiving is beneficial because it develops empathy, understanding, and the ability to accept imperfections in all people, including oneself. All of these responses increase future resiliency. Again, adults can teach forgiveness to children by modeling and talking about it directly.

## COMPETENCE AND TALENTS

Children who feel competent in schoolwork or other activities tend to be resilient.

***Academic competence.*** When children achieve academic success, they face all types of adversity with much greater success and are more likely to develop a lifetime commitment to learning. Every child's school and after-school academic program should be designed so that he or she is successful most of the time. Regular school attendance and homework completion are essential for academic success. Teachers and parents should help children learn a menu of study strategies and how to choose the right ones for them. They need a quiet time and place to study, and help when they encounter difficulty. This help can be provided at home, at school, in an after-school care center, through Internet support, or by study buddies.

***Talent development.*** In addition to academics, every child should develop competence in areas of talent. Which talents—playing team sports, hiking, playing a musical instrument, dancing, drawing, creative writing, bike riding, computer programming—is less important than the feelings of joy and competence that result. Sometimes a talent leads to a career. More often, it results in an improved ability to deal with stress, a source of friendships, a positive method of self-expression, and the constructive use of time. Adults play an important role in talent development by mentoring and providing encouragement, helping children set realistic and manageable goals, problem-solving together, and creatively finding ways to obtain necessary resources.

## POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS

Adults at home and in school can promote positive social relationships by providing support and expectations that require children to be considerate of themselves and others. Children and adolescents need to know what is expected, what behaviors are acceptable, and what behaviors are not. Along with clear rules, children and adolescents also need a loving and supportive relationship with family members and others. A network of connections, including emotionally close friends and relatives, fosters resiliency at all ages; thus, it is important to deliberately maintain relationships. For example, parents who must move to a different home can try to keep their children in the same schools and activities. If that is not possible, adults can encourage children and adolescents to maintain connections from a distance.

***Social networks of peers.*** Helping children develop and maintain friendships with other children who are good influences is very effective in fostering resiliency. Even in the absence of a supportive and caring family unit, peers and friends can mediate feelings of depression and anxiety.

***Extended family and community networks.*** Extended family and community network systems may include grandparents, cousins, siblings, neighbors, and organizations such as the Boys' & Girls' Clubs or Head Start. The availability of at least one parent or mentor outside of the home who is consistently supportive and nurturing has been associated with resiliency. In addition, multiple caregivers can provide necessary support for parents. For example, affiliation with a religious community can provide families with an organizing routine, a social network, and a world view through which children and families make sense of and respond to trauma and other life events.

***Supportive schools.*** Schools are important sources of social support. Teachers can build positive, trusting relationships with students by providing both academic and emotional support. They can create student-centered classroom communities focused on developing individual strengths as well as shared responsibility and ownership of education. Schools can also foster resiliency through parent workshops that teach effective communication and conflict-resolution skills. Furthermore, school personnel can foster resiliency by providing students' families with help navigating school and community resources. This often entails collaborating with other services so families can make smooth transitions from one resource to another.

***Peace-building skills.*** Peace-building skills foster resilience. Children who are appropriately assertive without being aggressive are least likely to be either victims or passive observers of bullies. Resiliency and academic success can be fostered through violence prevention initiatives such as the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program, Promoting Alternative THinking Strategies (PATHS), the Resolving Conflict Creatively Program, Responding in Peaceful and Positive Ways (RiPP), and Second Step (see Recommended Resources at the end of this handout). Violent behavior is also decreased by minimizing exposure to violent TV shows, movies, and video games.

***Helping others.*** Social competence and resilience are fostered by helping others. Elementary students can read to younger children in school, while adolescents can work in a food pantry, help build homes with Habitat for Humanity, and mentor younger children with similar interests, to give only a few examples.

## HEALTH

Good health increases resilience because it prepares the body and mind to handle life's challenges. Adults can foster children's resiliency by encouraging them to practice preventive health care.

***Nutrition.*** Children should be encouraged to eat well, particularly foods that foster neurological development, such as proteins (milk, meat, nuts) and vitamins (fruits, vegetables). Breakfasts containing protein improve school performance.

***Exercise.*** Adults can help children develop resiliency by encouraging them to exercise regularly. Exercise improves both physical and emotional health and helps children deal with the anxiety, anger, or depression that can result from adversity. Children who are disinclined to exercise can be encouraged by adults who exercise with them.

***Sleep.*** Adequate sleep fosters resiliency. Parents can strive to ensure that children—including teenagers—obtain the recommended 9-10 hours of sleep each night by helping them prioritize activities and resolve conflicts between their high sleep needs and the demands of school, activities, and jobs.

***Stress control.*** Resilient children, adolescents, and adults often practice positive stress control such as meditation, controlled breathing, and exercise. They do not abuse alcohol, tobacco, or drugs to reduce stress. The most important way for adults to teach children to use positive stress control is for the adults to model their use and encourage their children to join them.

***Medical care.*** Medical care (vaccinations, vision and hearing evaluations, and seeking medical care for illness) improves school performance. Some medications, like those that treat bipolar disorder, are essential for the resilience of individuals with chronic conditions.

***Prenatal care and education.*** Parents foster resiliency with good prenatal care. During pregnancy, the mother should eat well, take vitamins, see a physician, practice positive stress control, and avoid diseases, drugs, alcohol, and tobacco. A healthy prenatal environment helps unborn children attain a healthy weight, reach full term, and develop a healthy nervous system and brain. This means they are less likely to have future problems, and in turn increases resilience. While we cannot undo a poor prenatal environment once a child is born, in order to increase the resilience of future generations, all adolescents should learn about the importance of good prenatal care for their future children.

## CONCLUSION

Resiliency can be fostered by many different approaches and can be improved at any age. The more resilient approaches and habits children, adolescents, or adults maintain, the better their ability to weather whatever life brings. As Ernest Hemingway said, "The world breaks everyone, and afterward some are strong at the broken places."

## RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

### Print


Brooks, R., & Goldstein, S. (2002). *Raising resilient children: Fostering strength, hope, and optimism in your child.* New York: McGraw-Hill/Contemporary Books.

Doll, B., Zucker, S., & Brehm, K. (2004). *Resilient classrooms: Creating healthy environments for learning.* New York: Guilford Press.

Gottman, J. M., Declaire, J., & Goleman, D. P. (1998). *Raising an emotionally intelligent child.* Denver, CO: Fireside Press.

Harvey, V. S., & Chickie-Wolfe, L. A. (2007). *Fostering independent learning: Practical strategies to promote student success.* New York: Guilford Press.

Seligman, M. E. P. (2002). *Authentic happiness: Using the new positive psychology to realize your potential for lasting fulfillment.* New York: Free Press.


### Violence Prevention Programs

Olweus Bullying Prevention Program: http://www.clemson.edu/olweus

Promoting Alternative THinking Strategies (PATHS): A social and emotional learning program for children in grades K-6: http://www.channing-bete.com/prevention-programs/paths

Resolving Conflict Creatively Program (RCCP): http://www.esrnational.org

Responding in Peaceful and Positive Ways (RiPP): http://www.preventionopportunities.com

Second Step: Student Success Through Prevention: http://www.cfchildren.org

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