

Resilience guide for parents and teachers

Children’s problems include adapting to a new classroom, bullying by classmates, or abuse at home, but resilience is the ability to thrive despite these challenges.

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We tend to idealize childhood as a carefree time, but youth alone offers no shield against the emotional hurts, challenges, and traumas many children face. Children can be asked to deal with problems ranging from adapting to a new classroom or online schooling to bullying by peers or even struggles at home. Add to that the uncertainties that are part of growing up in a complex world, and childhood can be anything but carefree. The ability to thrive despite these challenges arises from the skills of resilience.

The good news is that resilience skills can be learned.

Building resilience—the ability to adapt well to adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or even significant sources of stress—can help our children manage stress and feelings of anxiety and uncertainty. However, being resilient does not mean that children won’t experience difficulty or distress. Emotional pain, sadness, and anxiety are common when we have suffered major trauma or personal loss, or even when we hear of someone else’s loss or trauma.

10 tips for building resilience in children and teens

1. Make connections

Teach your child the importance of engaging and connecting with their peers, including the skill of empathy and listening to others. Find ways to help children foster connectivity by suggesting they connect to peers in-person or through phone, video chats, and texts. It’s also important to build a strong family network. Connecting with others provides social support and strengthens resilience.

2. Help your child by having them help others

Children who may feel helpless can feel empowered by helping others. Engage your child in age-appropriate volunteer work or ask for assistance yourself with tasks that they can master. At school, brainstorm with children about ways they can help others in their class or in grades below.

3. Maintain a daily routine

Sticking to a routine can be comforting to children, especially younger children who crave structure in their lives. Work with your child to develop a routine, and highlight times that are for school work and play. Particularly during times of distress or transition, you might need to be flexible with some routines. At the same time, schedules and consistency are important to maintain.

4. Take a break

While some anxiety can motivate us to take positive action, we also need to validate all feelings. Teach your child how to focus on something that they can control or can act on. Help by challenging unrealistic thinking by asking them to examine the chances of the worst-case scenario and what they might tell a friend who has those worries. Be aware of what your child is exposed to that can be troubling, whether it's through the news, online, or overheard conversations. Although schools are being held accountable for performance or required to provide certain instruction, build in unstructured time during the school day to allow children to be creative.

5. Teach your child self-care

Teach your child the importance of basic self-care. This may be making more time to eat properly, exercise, and get sufficient sleep. Make sure your child has time to have fun, and participate in activities they enjoy. Caring for oneself and even having fun will help children stay balanced and better deal with stressful times.

6. Move toward your goals

Teach your child to set reasonable goals and help them to move toward them one step at a time. Establishing goals will help children focus on a specific task and can help build the resilience to move forward in the face of challenges. At school, break down large assignments into small, achievable goals for younger children, and for older children, acknowledge accomplishments on the way to larger goals.

7. Nurture a positive self-view

Help your child remember ways they have successfully handled hardships in the past and help them understand that these past challenges help build the strength to handle future challenges. Help your child learn to trust themselves to solve problems and make appropriate decisions. At school, help children see how their individual accomplishments contribute to the wellbeing of the class as a whole.

8. Keep things in perspective and maintain a hopeful outlook

Even when your child is facing very painful events, help them look at the situation in a broader context and keep a long-term perspective. Although your child may be too young to consider a long-term look on their own, help them see that there is a future beyond the current situation and that the future can be good. An optimistic and positive outlook can enable children to see the good things in life and keep going even in the hardest times. In school, use history to show that life moves forward after bad events, and the worst things are specific and temporary.

9. Look for opportunities for self-discovery

Tough times are often when children learn the most about themselves. Help your child take a look at how whatever they're facing can teach them "what am I made of." At school, consider leading discussions of what each student has learned after facing a tough situation.

10. Accept change

Change often can be scary for children and teens. Help your child see that change is part of life and new goals can replace goals that have become unattainable. It is important to examine what is going well, and to have a plan of action for what is not going well. In school, point out how students have changed as they moved up in grade levels and discuss how that change has had an impact on the students.

Resilience and preschool children

Very young children will only recently have mastered the skills of walking and talking, and they may not be able to express their anxieties and fears. Although you may think they are too young to understand what is happening, even very young children can absorb frightening events from the news or from conversations they overhear.

Watch your children for signs of fear and sadness they may not be able to put into words. Have your children become extra clingy or needing more hugs than usual? Have your children started old habits after you thought they had outgrown the behavior? Are they suddenly more irritable? They may be feeling the pressure of what is going on in the world around them. Use play to help your children express their fears and encourage them to use art or pretend games to express what they may not be able to put into words.

Use family time like a security blanket for your children: wrap them up in family closeness and make sure your children have lots of family time. During times of stress and change, spend more time with your children playing games, reading to them, or just holding them close.

Resilience and elementary school children

Elementary school children may be starting to form new friend groups and participate in new activities as they come into their own. As they start to study subjects about the world outside of their homes, they look to teachers as well as to parents to make them feel safe and to help sort it all out.

Make sure your child has a place where they can feel safe, whether that is home or school (ideally, both would feel safe).

Talk to your children. When they have questions, answer them honestly and with reassurance that includes simple statements that let them know you are taking actions to keep them safe and are there to take care of them. Listen to their concerns and fears when they address them with you and let them know you are there for them.

When there is a situation outside of the home that is frightening, limit the amount of news your children watch or listen to. There is always the possibility that they misinterpret what they see or hear on the news. You don't need to hide what's happening in the world from your children, but neither do they have to be exposed to constant stories that fuel their fears. Check in on their understanding of what they have been exposed to.

Realize that extra stressors may heighten normal daily stresses. Your children might normally be able to handle a failed test or teasing, but be understanding that they may respond with anger or bad behavior to stress that normally wouldn't rattle them. Reassure them that you just want what is best for them and that you are there for them.

Resilience and middle school children

Even without larger traumas, middle school can be an especially difficult time for many children as they struggle to meet extra academic demands and avoid new social pitfalls. They look to teachers and friends as well as to parents to make them feel safe.

Reinforce empathy and help your child keep perspective. If your child falls into the shifting of social groups that form in middle school, help them understand that other children may be feeling just as lonely and confused, and help them to see beyond the current situation.

Talk with your child about your own feelings during times of extraordinary stress. Your children may be old enough to appreciate hearing about your own thoughts and feelings, but also the ways in which you cope. Share how the ways you cope are helpful to you, but also find techniques that may benefit your child.

Resilience and high schoolers

Although your teens may tower over you, they still are young and can keenly feel the fear and uncertainty of both the normal stresses of being a teen, as well as events in the world around them. Emotions may be volatile and close to the surface during teen years, and finding the best way to connect to your teen can be difficult.

Talk with them whenever you can, even if it seems they don't want to talk. Sometimes the best time to talk may be when you are in the car together; sometimes it may be when you are doing chores together, allowing your teen to focus on something else while they talk. When they have questions, answer them honestly but with reassurance. Ask them their opinion about what is happening and listen to their answers.

Find a place that your teen can create as their safe place, whether it's their bedroom or somewhere they find comfort. In high school, emotions can intensify, and rejection, taunting, or bullying can also be present. A space of their own can serve as a constant and a place for them to have as their own. Your children may prefer to be with their friends rather than spend time with you, but be ready to provide lots of family time for them when they need it and set aside family time that includes their friends.

When stressful things are happening in the world at large, encourage your teen to take "news breaks," whether they are getting news from the television, magazines or newspapers, or online. Use what they're seeing and hearing as a catalyst for discussion. Teens may act like they feel immortal, but at bottom they still want to know that everything will be ok. Having honest discussions of your fears and expectations can help your high schooler learn to express their own fears. If your teen struggles with words, encourage them to use journaling or art to express emotions.

Many teens are already feeling extreme highs and lows because of hormonal levels in their bodies; added stress or trauma can make these shifts seem more extreme. Be understanding of feelings and emotions, but also be firm when teens respond to stress with angry or sullen behavior. Reassure your child that they will be ok and you are looking out for their best interest

The journey of resilience

Developing resilience is a personal journey, and you should use your knowledge of your own children to guide them on their journey. An approach to building resilience that works for you or your child might not work for someone else.

If your child seems stuck or overwhelmed and unable to use these tips, you may want to consider talking to someone who can help, such as a psychologist or other mental health professional. Turning to someone for guidance may help your child strengthen resilience and persevere during times of stress or trauma.

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