

Coping skills (resilience)



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Helping children build the inner strength to cope with adversity and the ups and downs of growing up is one of the best things parents can do.

Having the confidence and skills to face, overcome or even be strengthened by hardship is a powerful thing to teach them.

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What is resilience?

'Resilience' is our ability to do well in spite of stresses. It is about successfully coping with problems and building strengths that protect and promote wellbeing.

Our resilience comes from a combination of:

- our individual genetic makeup
- the skills, strengths and attitudes we develop
- the support we have from people around us in our family and community.

How resilient we are is not fixed but can grow and change over time. We can show resilience in some situations but not cope so well at other times.

The first step in helping children to cope is to protect them from major stresses where possible. The more adversity children face, the more it is likely to affect their wellbeing. Building strengths for coping benefits all children whether or not they face big stresses.

Children need to feel:

- **'I can make a difference'. I can:**
 - find ways to solve problems
 - talk to others about things that frighten or bother me
 - control myself when needed
 - find someone to help me
- **'I am a worthwhile person'. I am:**
 - loved and loveable
 - happy to do things for others and show I care
 - respectful of others and myself
 - willing to be responsible for what I do
- **'I have people I trust who love and support me'. They:**
 - show me how to do things right
 - want me to learn to do things on my own
 - will keep me safe.

Children also need:

- be safe and feel safe
- to feel they can count on you
- to feel included and appreciated
- to make a contribution
- positive ways of thinking
- a sense of optimism
- to try new things
- to learn to persist.

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We cannot always prevent things going wrong for our children but we can help them build strengths for coping.

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What can cause stress

Each child is different and will react to difficult situations in their own way. Some can seem to be unaffected while others even in the same family, can be very upset. Things that can cause stress include:

- everyday ups and downs - problems that seem small to an adult can feel big to a child
- many changes in their life, eg schools, where they live, who cares for them
- family break-up, separation, divorce
- serious illness or death of a loved one
- living with disability - their own, another child in the family, a parent
- racism or discrimination
- catastrophes, eg bushfires, floods, car accidents
- violence, abuse or neglect.

If these things are happening, there are services that can help if you need it. If there is violence, abuse or neglect, seek help straight away.

How parents can build children's coping skills

Feeling loved and safe

Children need to feel loved and safe and that they have a place in the world where they belong. They need to feel part of the family, that they are appreciated and will be missed if they are away.

Children build an inner sense of self-worth (self-esteem) from birth even before they know who they are. When you respond to babies' cries, comfort them, smile, talk and play with them, they learn they matter to you.

Children need you to:

- spend time with them
- show you care, with actions and words
- support their interests
- listen and show you value what they say (even if you don't agree).

Predictable routines and family rituals can help children feel secure in times of stress. You could have:

- regular meal times and bed times
- night time routines, eg a bath, story, goodnight kiss
- something special you do when they get home from school
- ways your family celebrates birthdays or other occasions.

Feeling loved and safe provides a strong foundation for coping.

Building relationships

Strong relationships with people who care about them help children to cope. You could help children to:

- spend time with caring adults in their life
- play and socialise with friends
- build skills for having friends, eg being aware of others' feelings, showing respect and care
- be involved in local community activities.

It can also help to model positive relationships in your own life.

Managing feelings

A sense of being in control of themselves builds children's confidence. Some children are easily upset when things go wrong and can find it hard to control their reactions. Some ways to help all children are to:

- acknowledge their feelings, eg 'I can see you feel sad/upset', 'It is OK to cry'
- let them know all feelings are OK, even difficult ones
- help them name their feelings, eg anger, frustration, worry
- stay close and help them calm down. They will get better at calming themselves the more you do this. If they would rather be on their own, let them know they can come to you when they are ready
- say that difficulties are part of life – they will pass and things will get better.



Give children lots of opportunities to feel joy, laugh and play. These positive emotions can encourage children to think more broadly, explore, be creative and get along with others. These are important strengths for coping and can be the foundation for building even more skills.

Being resilient doesn't mean never having difficult feelings. It is about managing them in healthy ways. Sensitive children can be just as resilient as other children.

Building skills

Children need to feel a sense of personal power and that they can do things for themselves. Every time they achieve something they believe they can go on trying and have more success. Building confidence starts early in life. You could:

- smile and clap when a baby does something for themselves
- let toddlers try doing things – don't always do it for them
- encourage children to learn skills for independence, eg how to get ready for school, prepare food, shop for themselves, use public transport
- let them have choice and make decisions suitable for their age, eg what to wear, how to spend pocket money. As they gain skills they can have greater choice
- help them learn to solve their own problems. Ask for their ideas if something goes wrong for them, rather than jumping in and solving it for them. Even young children can have good ideas. If siblings argue, you could get them to listen to each other and come up with solutions
- ask their opinion about things that are to do with them. This helps them feel they have a say and some control in their lives

- help children think ahead and plan ways of dealing with tricky situations, eg what to do if they forget their lunchbox, a friend is mean to them, they miss the bus.

When children feel successful at something it builds their sense of being able to make a difference when there are challenges.

Taking 'safe risks'

Encouraging a 'have a go' attitude early is very empowering. Taking on challenges helps children see what is possible. Challenges should extend children but not be so difficult they become discouraged.

Children learn:

- to think about their decisions
- to take reasonable risks in ways that keep them safe
- they can overcome obstacles
- they can cope if things go wrong or they fail.

You could:

- break difficult things down into small steps
- let them know it is OK to make mistakes - they are for learning from. Help them work out what they can do if it happens again.

Encourage children to have a go at things that challenge them. Say they may not know how to do it now, but it will get easier the more they do it.

Focussing on strengths

Knowing their strengths helps children feel they have some power in their lives. You could:

- notice children's strengths and tell them, eg kindness, fairness, honesty, bravery
- talk about how they can use their strengths when there are problems
- focus on what they can do, not what they can't do



- give them lots of time to do what they are good at. It can be tempting to make them practise what they aren't so good at. This may be needed at times but they also need time to feel successful
- praise efforts rather than outcomes, eg 'I can see how hard you worked on your project.' Be specific so they know what they've done well, eg 'I like the detail you put in that diagram'. Children are quick to spot unrealistic or inflated praise and this can make some children feel less worthy.

Asking for help

Encourage children to do what they can for themselves, but to ask for help when they need it. You could help them:

- identify who they could go to in different situations
- practise what they might say. Make sure they know how to contact family or friends that can help them.

Be ready to help children but resist the temptation to jump in too soon. Too much protection from disappointment and failure may not give them the chance to learn how to deal with mistakes or difficult situations.

Positive thinking

How we cope in life often depends on how we see situations. When children think positively and have a sense of optimism, they are more likely to have a go and succeed.

- **Tell children positive stories about themselves.** The way adults think and talk is very powerful in shaping children's beliefs about why success or failure might happen. When children hear positive stories about themselves, such as their strengths, or times they were able to cope well or succeed, it helps shape how they view themselves and their ability to face challenges.

Showing your genuine delight in what children are learning or doing has a powerful impact.

- **Talk positively about situations.** For example, saying 'I was just thinking that when you allow enough time and really try hard with your maths homework you usually get good results', is more helpful than 'See, you never allow enough time and you really don't try hard enough with maths'.
- **Reframe what children say.** For example, if they say they don't have any friends, you could say 'Sometimes it's hard to find a friend, but last week you had fun when you were playing that game with Jake'.
- **Show you understand negative thoughts and feelings.** For example, saying 'It sounds like you're worried about that test' is more helpful than saying they're being silly or telling them not to think like that. They will be more likely to express their feelings next time.
- **Help children replace negative thoughts with positive ones.** Some positive thoughts are:
 - 'Things always get easier the more I do them'
 - 'I can try my best'
 - 'I have done well before'
 - 'I can always ask someone to help me'.

Some unhelpful thoughts are:

- 'This is too hard for me'
- 'I am no good at this'
- 'I can't do it on my own'
- 'No-one likes me'.

Negative thinking can get worse with each setback and become self-fulfilling, eg 'Every time I try to kick a goal I miss anyway, so I may as well not try anymore and not even go to practice. I never get picked for the team anyway'. Children can feel down and hopeless and find reasons things won't work. They can give up before even trying.



- **Help children notice their helpful and unhelpful thoughts**, eg 'How did your thoughts change when you went from losing to winning that tennis game?' Encourage them to stick with helpful thoughts.
- **Help them find the first step towards a solution.** If they can do one small thing, they are on their way to success.
- **Help them find humour in the situation.**
- **Inspire children with positive stories.** Hearing how others have coped can help children see a way forward. You could:
 - tell your own stories of dealing with challenges, eg 'When.....happened, I thought.....but then I realised....'
 - tell stories of family members, friends, famous people or others who have done brave or kind things
 - find stories about girls and boys successfully facing challenges. What did they do? What else could they have done?
 - use movies to inspire, eg the Lion King.

Identity and culture

A strong sense of identity and feeling connected with culture and community can support children's resilience. Parents can help foster pride and connection with culture by:

- teaching children about their family history and culture
- supporting involvement in cultural activities or events
- building their relationships with family members or others who can help and inspire them.

Values and beliefs

Having a strong set of values or belonging to a spiritual community can provide support, friendship, meaning and purpose to life.

Model effective coping

How parents cope in life has a big impact on how children cope. Let them see you:

- making sense of a situation. Share your positive thoughts, optimism and humour
- seeing the positives in life, even if there are problems
- coping well with your own challenges, eg staying positive, treating others with respect, finding solutions, learning new skills, being persistent
- getting help if you need it.

Getting help

In difficult times it is important to seek support for your child, eg from family, friends, their school, community services or health professionals. Seek support for yourself if you need it, and make time to look after your own health and wellbeing.





Want more information?

Parent Helpline

Phone 1300 364 100

For advice on child health and parenting

Kids Helpline

Phone 1800 551 800

Phone and online support for children and young people aged 5 to 25 years

<https://kidshelpline.com.au>

1800 RESPECT

Phone 1800 737 732, 24 hours

For confidential, information counselling and support for people impacted by family violence, sexual assault or abuse

Beyond Blue

Information on building children's resilience <https://healthyfamilies.beyondblue.org.au/healthy-homes/building-resilience>

KidsMatter

Information for parents and schools about children's mental health and wellbeing, including coping skills www.kidsmatter.edu.au

ReachOut

Information and support for parents, schools and young people dealing with everyday troubles or tough times www.reachout.com

Child and Youth Health

Information on resilience for parents, children and teenagers www.cyh.com

Raising Children Network

Information on resilience www.raisingchildren.net.au

Parenting SA

For more Parent Easy Guides including 'Dealing with a crisis', 'Self-esteem', 'What is your parenting style?', 'Living with toddlers', 'Living with young people' and 'Positive approaches to guiding behaviour 2-12 years' www.parenting.sa.gov.au



**Government of
South Australia**

Parenting SA

A partnership between the Department of Human Services and the Women's and Children's Health Network.

Ph: 08 8303 1660

www.parenting.sa.gov.au

Parent Easy Guides are free in South Australia.

Important: This information is not intended to replace advice from a qualified practitioner.

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