

Resiliency in Children

Childhood is a time of exploration and trying new behaviours. Rather than trying to remove life's challenges, we need to support our children to develop self-confidence, skills and abilities that make them resilient. Developing these skills will benefit children as they move into adolescence and adulthood.

What is Resiliency?

Resilience means the ability to overcome and "bounce back" from change or from difficult life events. A person that is resilient is able to learn from their experiences and apply this knowledge and coping skills to other situations. The more resiliency factors a child has, the more likely he or she will be able to resist negative influences and manage stress.

What are Resiliency Factors?

Resiliency factors are things within a person's environment that assist in developing self-confidence and resilience. These factors provide a cushion or protection against harmful or negative influences. Resiliency factors increases the likelihood that children will be able to make healthy choices.

Risk Factors

Children search for a way to belong and participate. Behaviours that we consider negative, or to be 'risk factors' may be a child's search for premature independence, repeated recognition and unhealthy attachment to others, where adults are unavailable, critical or model negative behaviours.

Characteristics of Resilient Children

Resilient Children:

- Are involved in meaningful activities
- Have goals and a positive outlook
- Have an interest in school
- Are assertive
- Are aware of their feelings and able to work through difficult emotions
- Seek out positive adult role models
- Can solve problems
- Are confident in their abilities
- Have a network of supportive people
- Can reflect and remember times when they have done well despite difficulty
- Can cope with uncertainty in their lives
- Have empathy toward others
- Have a sense of responsibility
- Show qualities of being both independent, and dependent on others

Some 'risk factors' include:

- Poor school performance
- Peers with negative attitudes and behaviours
- Illness
- Violence
- Dropping out of school
- Gang involvement
- Drug use
- Excessive or early alcohol use
- Family conflict, neglect or abuse

Resiliency is present in all children, regardless of their behaviour and circumstances. For example, when children are involved with negative peer groups and behaviours (e.g., gang activities), they may also be showing qualities of leadership and loyalty. If given support by adults and other community members, these same survival skills can be channelled to more positive activities (e.g., being leaders within peer age activities, showing loyalty to their sports team).

How to be a Supportive Parent

Be a good role model

- Stay calm in the face of challenges
- Do kind things for yourself
- Set limits on what you will do for others
- Set boundaries in your relationships, requiring that others treat you with respect

If you want your child to make wise decisions, you need to demonstrate good decision-making skills. Children observe what their parents do, how they spend their leisure time, how they handle difficult situations, and how they interact with others. Your behaviours will influence how your child looks at and thinks about the world. To raise a healthy child, you need to be a positive role model and make healthy decisions for yourself.

Build a strong relationship

- Start building a good relationship when your child is young
- Be a positive role model
- set clear boundaries, and consistently follow through
- Have high but reasonable expectations

Parents, other adults and the community can play important roles in influencing whether or not your child behaves in negative ways. Having a consistent and positive presence in your child's life will help them feel more attached to you. When this strong tie is present, children are more likely to ask for

support when they encounter situations that are unfamiliar, uncomfortable, difficult or stressful.

Be mindful of stressful times

- Share life stories of when you have struggled
- Avoid judging or criticizing
- Be a patient listener
- Be genuinely interested, asking about your child's interests, thoughts and feelings
- Be caring and supportive

Assist your child through transition periods. This includes such times as moving from kindergarten to elementary school, elementary school to high school, and other milestones that a child goes through as they are growing up. Although these times can be exciting, they can also be stressful, creating anxiety or excessive worry in children.

Provide adequate supervision

- Know where your child is and be able to contact him or her as needed
- Let your child know where and how you can be contacted
- Have someone available to your child if you cannot be reached
- Have adequate child care arrangements in place
- Know your child's friends
- Be aware of the online games and websites your child visits

Securing your child's safety does not mean you let your fears take over and interfere with his or her independence. You don't need to watch every move your child makes. Adequate supervision is a fine balance, and is important for helping your child feel secure and confident.

Protect, but don't 'overprotect'

- Don't shield your child from all of life's challenges. Allow your child to make mistakes under your watchful eye, and to learn from these mistakes
- Let your child see you struggle as you move toward solving problems
- Tell your child you believe in his or her abilities
- Encourage your child to ask for help if needed

Support your child through negative experiences, but avoid placing blame or rescuing. When your child is disappointed about not reaching a personal goal (e.g., not being selected for a sports team or not getting a higher grade at school), be supportive. At the same time, it is important not to shield your child from all of life's difficulties. Mistakes help children learn how to manage and cope with difficult situations. Help your child understand that mistakes are a normal part of life, as they help build character and a sense of determination. Mistakes also can give your child a new perspective the next time a challenge arises.

Involve your child

- Give your child opportunities to participate within your community
- Provide opportunities for your child to learn to be responsible (e.g., chores) even at a young age
- Allow your child to make some of his or her own decisions
- Encourage your child to use creativity and imagination
- Encourage your child's independence. Let your child know that he or she is capable
- Let your child see you struggle as you move toward solving problems
- Focus on your child's strengths and abilities

Don't make all the decisions regarding your child. When children are allowed to influence decisions and are given choices, they learn to be capable, competent and confident. Your child will develop a strong sense of self-worth, have high self-expectations, and feel a sense of importance, pride and commitment.

Sources and Helpful Websites

Alberta Health Services at www.albertahealthservices.ca

Canadian Centre for Substance Abuse at www.ccsa.ca

Centre for Addiction and Mental Health at www.camh.net

Centre for Addictions Research of BC at www.carbc.ca

Child & Youth Health Network for Eastern Ontario at
www.child-youth-health.net

Michael Ungar at www.michaelungar.com,
www.resilienceproject.org and www.voicesforchildren.ca

SAMHSA Model Programs at www.modelprograms.samhsa.gov

Saskatchewan HealthLine online at www.healthlineonline.ca