



THINKING ABOUT RESILIENCY IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Resilience is a word you've probably heard a lot about in the last few years. It's become part of the mantra for raising healthy kids and there are often lots of suggestions for parents about what to do to encourage its development in their children. One of the key points about resilience that may not be emphasized enough is the importance of giving children the space they need to make mistakes. That's often when the learning occurs. A little bit of stress helps them develop the skills they need to flourish. Strengthening children towards healthy living is about nurturing the strategies to deal with adversity. Another thing that is often missing about resiliency is information that actually describes what it is. So, let's start there.

The simplest definition of resiliency is the ability to bounce back from the things in life that are tripping you up or stressing you. When we experience stress, our bodies react in ways that were designed to help us get through that stressful situation. Our heart rate increases, blood pressure goes up, and adrenaline and cortisol (the stress hormone) surge through the body. There's a chemical process that takes place in several different parts of our brains to increase our ability to be hyperalert- what you may have heard referred to as the flight-flight-or-freeze response? When there is that surge in brain chemicals, we usually feel that overwhelmed sensation that tells us that we're in trouble and our capacity to think clearly, rationally and emotionally about how to get out of the problem we're in is impaired. Even though our stress reaction is centered in the brain, it's not hard-wired, which means it can be adapted and modified. And one of the ways we can do that, in ourselves and our children, is by cultivating resiliency skills.



Resilience can be nurtured and increased over our lifetimes. Think for example, about something that scared you when you were in elementary school. Maybe it was an animal or an insect, or being in the dark- as you know, lots of things can seem scary to little children. Think about how you reacted when you were exposed to that situation or thing. Your heartbeat may have felt like it was in your throat, you may have started to sweat, shake or cry. Perhaps you ran to your parents or hid under your bed- you did something to help you cope. As you got older and more mature, your resilience to that scary thing increased, and, hopefully, it wasn't so scary anymore. After a bit of trial and error, you learned how to manage your worries. Maybe your heart still skipped a beat if you thought about what stressed or frightened you but had learned the skills you needed to manage that fear. The take-away from that example is that we CAN teach our children additional resiliency skills, even in elementary school.

There are, of course, many books written on this topic so rather than give you a condensed version of techniques for increasing resiliency that you can find with a simple Google search, we're going to highlight a couple of very basic points to get you started:

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- The most effective way to begin to build resiliency skills is to become a safe trusted presence in your child's life, someone to whom they can turn when their stress seems overwhelming. Why this works is also based in biology. Remember that stress hormone cortisol we just talked about? There's another hormone, oxytocin, that gets released when we know we have someone we can turn to that we trust to be there for us when we're stressed. The oxytocin reduces the effects of cortisol (the stress hormone) and helps your child calm down, returning their brain more quickly to their normal, logical state where their problem-solving ability is improved.

There are a couple of important points to make about this trusted relationship:

- You'll notice this explanation didn't say anything about solving the problem for your child? It's about you being a listening, understanding presence who helps your child figure out how to solve the problem themselves. Taking their stress away doesn't increase resiliency and actually makes them more dependent on turning to you, or someone else, to fix the problems in their life. This can be challenging when parenting in the past has often strived to protect children from upsetting, uncomfortable feelings and, is now encouraging parents to step back, be patient and lend support as children work their way through stressful situations themselves.
- Other people can also fulfill the role of this supportive relationship- other family members, teachers, coaches. The person doesn't really matter; what counts is that your child has at least one reliable, supportive relationship that can help reverse some of the physiological changes that are activated by stress.
- Give your child permission to ask others for help. Some children feel disloyal if they turn to someone other than a parent or a guardian for support. Acknowledge that sometimes other people can be just as helpful, or even more helpful than you and ask them to name who else in their life they consider to be a 'trusted adult'.
- Kids don't always notice the people who are in their corner, cheering them on, so remind them about the people who care about them and encourage those connections. The more connected we are to others, the more we can feel supported when those life challenges come our way.

Finally, be an example of optimism. Resiliency isn't about not making mistakes- it's about getting through them and learning from them. While it can be discouraging when your child goes through a rough patch and struggles to get their bearings, they will learn more from figuring out how to get through the experience than in you doing it for them. You are helping to teach them the difficult lesson that there are lots of bumps in life's road and we learn from each of them how to avoid similar stumbling blocks in the future. And no matter what happens, you'll be there to help them through!