



The Seven Ingredients of Resilience: Information for Parents

You've probably heard of the 3 Rs: Reading, Writing, Arithmetic—a focus of education. What about the fourth R—Resilience? Resilience is the ability to bounce back from setbacks, learn from failure, be motivated by challenges, and believe in your own abilities to deal with the stress and difficulties in life. Resilience skills are as important as the other 3Rs. Why? Because every child's life will be touched by setbacks as well as achievement, pain as well as joy, loss as well as triumph. In order for children to reach their fullest potential, they need to know how to approach life with resilience. What you might not know is that, just like reading, writing, and arithmetic, resilience can be learned. Children can learn—from their parents, teachers, and coaches—how to develop the skills of resilience. Resilience enables your child to thrive no matter what life puts in his or her path.

THE SEVEN INGREDIENTS OF RESILIENCE

Resilience is not all or nothing. It comes in amounts. You can be a little resilient, a lot resilient, resilient in some situations but not others. And, no matter how resilient your child is today, you can help him or her become more resilient tomorrow. Research has identified a variety of important ingredients of resilience but there are seven that we can most easily teach our children.

Emotion awareness and control. One of the myths about resilience is that resilient people tough it out without expressing emotion: They keep it all inside and are stoic in the face of adversity. This view of resilience might be common, but it's not accurate. Resilient people—adults and children—are comfortable with their feelings and they express them. In fact, resilient children experience a broad array of emotions—happiness, joy, fear, and sadness. They have a good understanding of their own emotions and they feel comfortable talking about what they are feeling with people they trust. So, when a resilient child goes through a tough time, she does feel sad or scared or anxious. After all, she is human! However, there is an important difference that distinguishes the more resilient from the less resilient. Resilient children don't get “stuck” in an emotion. Although they might feel sad or scared, these feelings don't prevent them from coping with the situation and moving forward. When an emotion is too strong, so strong that it interferes with the person's ability to cope, the resilient person knows how to control her emotions so that she is able to push forward with a plan of action.

Impulse control. We all have impulses to do things and say things that aren't in our best interest or helpful or kind to others. Resilience doesn't require that you stop having these impulses, but it does require you to stop yourself from acting on every impulse you have. Resilient children have internalized the “stop and think” message and use it to make choices about their actions. The good news is that impulse control can be learned. So even if your child is impulsive, you can learn some simple strategies to teach him to handle situations better.

Realistic optimism. Optimism is another key ingredient of resilience. The research on optimism is clear: Optimistic people are happier, healthier, more productive, have better relationships, succeed more, are better problem solvers, and are less likely to become depressed than pessimistic people. Programs have been developed that teach children and adolescents critical optimism and resilience skills. Research shows that kids can learn these skills and that optimism and resilience protect children against depression and anxiety. This is critical because at any one point in time as many as 10%–19% of adolescents report moderate to high level symptoms of depression. Children and adolescents with high symptoms of depression are more likely than their peers to have academic difficulty, smoke cigarettes, abuse alcohol or other drugs, and attempt suicide. You notice, however, that we talk about “realistic optimism.” This is important. Resilience is not served by denying problems when they exist, believing that you never make mistakes, and blaming others whenever things go wrong. Resilience is about seeing yourself and situations as optimistically as you can—but within the bounds of reality. Realistic optimism keeps you shooting for the stars without losing sight of the ground below.

Flexible thinking. Resilient children are flexible thinkers. They view problems from several different perspectives. When a resilient child has a fight with her best friend, she is able to view the situation from the friend’s perspective as well as her own. When a resilient child doesn’t do well on a test, he is able to come up with a variety of factors that might have led to the poor outcome. Why does this matter? It matters because flexible thinking increases the likelihood that you’ll be able to come up with solutions to the problem you’re confronting. Flexible thinking means that you’ll generate a number of different ways to handle the situation so, if your first solution doesn’t work, you’ll have a Plan B ready.

Self-efficacy. A basic ingredient in resilience is belief in one’s self: self-confidence. Resilient children believe that they are effective in the world. They have learned what their strengths and weaknesses are, and they rely on their strengths to navigate the challenges in life. For one child this might mean using his sense of humor to deal with stress; for another child it might mean using her creativity to come up with new ways to handle problems. But don’t confuse self-efficacy with self-esteem. Self-esteem is about feeling good about one’s self and self-efficacy is about effecting change in the world. The road to resilience is through self-efficacy, not self-esteem. If your child is confident and knows how to master what life throws in his path, self-esteem will follow.

Empathy. Resilient children are connected with others. In fact, some of the landmark studies in resilience show that children who have at least one enduring relationship with a caring adult (a parent, a neighbor, a teacher, a coach) do well and can overcome even the most difficult hardships. Empathy is an important component of strong social relationships. Children who care about others, are interested in other people’s feelings and experiences, and want to help others through tough times are more likely to have strong, healthy friendships. Empathy serves resilience by facilitating strong relationships. Children who have a strong network of friends and adults who care about them have a support system that they can turn to when they need help.

Reaching out. Resilient children take risks. This doesn’t mean hurling themselves off mountaintops or riding motorcycles without helmets. It means appropriate, horizon expanding risks. Children who are resilient don’t see failure as something to be avoided. They are willing to try new things because deep down they know that by trying new things and taking risks they will learn more, achieve more, and enjoy life more. The risk taking might take the form of signing up for a hard class or talking

with someone they've never met before or even just trying a new food. Their optimism fuels them and their self-efficacy gives them the confidence to try, even when that means risking failure.

YOUR RESILIENCE CUPBOARD

Take a moment and reflect on the seven ingredients of resilience. Make a list of the ingredients you have in abundance (your resilience strengths) and make a list of the resilience ingredients you are low on (your resilience weaknesses). Do the same for your child. Remember, we can all become more resilient tomorrow than we are today. You don't need to have your cupboard overflowing with each of the seven ingredients. Challenge yourself to use your resilience strengths more fully and see if you can devote some energy to increasing one of the ingredients you are low on.

RESOURCES

NASP–Fishful Thinking Partnership website <http://www.nasponline.org/families/fishful/index.aspx>

NASP Optimism and Resilience Resources <http://www.nasponline.org/families/optimism.aspx>

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