

BUILDING RESILIENCE IN OUR CHILDREN

BY CHIP DELORENZO, M.ED.

Miriam-Webster Dictionary defines resilience as “an ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change.” In working with parents and teachers I have found that this is one of the primary characteristics that adults would like to encourage and develop in their children. However, as adults this can be very hard to nurture because building resilience means practicing resilience.

Resilience is practiced through experiencing adversity and pain, and learning how to recover. Many adults find it very difficult to allow their children to experience discomfort, disappointment and pain. As adults we sometimes believe we are not doing our job if we allow our children to have negative experiences.

Let’s take a moment to examine the effects of sheltering children from the negative experiences of pain, disappointment, struggle and discomfort. What characteristics or behaviors might we invite by overprotecting our children from these things? Adjectives like fearful, rigid, timid, shy, aggressive, insensitive, and overly sensitive come up. Do you know any adults who have a hard time adjusting to change, or rebounding from setbacks? What does it look like? How do you react to this person? How do others?

Now, on the other hand, do you know adults who you would characterize as resilient? What adjectives might you use to describe this person? Common responses include flexible, positive, empathetic, confident, wise and strong.

In order to develop resilience, children must be allowed to experience both positive and negative consequences. ***If we take away the struggle we steal the victory from the child!***

Imagine this: A three-year-old child is carrying a heavy bag from her car to the house. Her father is bringing groceries into the house, and doesn’t see how much his daughter is struggling with her bag. The child has to put her bag down as she walks the 20 feet towards the house. She picks it back up and carries it a few feet, stops again and rests. Again, she picks it back up and carries it a few more feet. When she is within six feet her father notices her struggling. Take a moment and consider how you might feel as the young girl when her father reacts in each of the following ways:

- a) He stops and says to her kindly, “Oh honey, that looks really heavy, let me carry that for you.”
- b) He pauses and acknowledges her saying, “I noticed you’re really working hard to get that bag inside. Nice job.”

What might this little girl experience by struggling to the door with her bag and achieving her objective? Adults need to differentiate between appropriate and inappropriate struggle. The key to discerning between the two is identifying the child’s ability to recover from a painful experience safely. For example, my wife felt very strongly about teaching our toddlers how to climb up and down stairs safely rather than using baby gates. In doing so, she “spotted” them, allowing them to fall a step or two on carpeted stairs as they were learning to descend.

This allowed the children to experience natural consequence of falling, so that they knew to be careful as they were building their independence. However, if my wife did not spot them, or allowed them to explore the stairs freely, the consequence of their mistakes could have resulted in serious injury, which would have been inappropriate. Also, if she had not let them fall, then the children might have taken risks, independently, which could have caused serious injury. In the end, our children were able to navigate the stairs safely from the time they were about 14 months old, and we did not have to panic or hover when we left the house and

encountered unprotected stairs. Our children’s confidence to move about and explore independently and safely developed naturally.

The example of the child learning to navigate the stairs can be used as an analogy as well. All children experience social challenges while developing. This means that sometimes their feelings will get hurt. They will not be invited to parties they want to attend. They will be teased (and do some teasing!). They will have a friend exclude them (and do some excluding!).

However, if we support rather than rescue, we can provide the children with an environment where they grow from social mistakes, and the mistakes of others, learning to navigate conflict confidently and resiliently. Out of those experiences our children will learn that they can recover from adversity and develop empathy for others who have a similar experience.

Mistakes are a wonderful opportunity to learn! As Confucius said, “I hear, and I forget. I see, and I remember. I do (experience), and I learn.” This may seem hard or even callous when considering our paternal instincts and what it means to us when we see our children hurting. Empathizing and showing love and concern are not the same as rescuing, however. The question to ask is: when do we want our children to build this vital life skill? Now or when the consequences are more severe?

5 ways to help children develop resilience:

1. **Allow your child(ren) to experience natural consequences.** Natural consequences are the consequence of intentional non-involvement by the adult. For instance, if a child forgets his jacket, he gets cold. If she forgets her lunch, she gets hungry.
2. **Use reflective listening to help your child learn from their experiences.** Don’t interpret positive or negative experience for your child, but help them develop their own frame of reference. After a child has experienced pain (or happiness), ask questions that cause them to reflect on their experience, like:
 - o What happened?
 - o What caused that to happen?
 - o What did you learn from this experience?
 - o What’s your plan for next time.
 - o
3. **Use Encouragement vs. Praise.** Encouragement causes children to self-reflect. Praise causes children to become dependent upon the approval of others. Encouragement is process-centered. Praise is product-centered. Here are some examples:

Encouragement	Praise
You really stuck it out.	Good boy.
I noticed you working really hard on that.	That’s just what I expected.

How do you feel about that?	I'm so proud of you.
Why do you think you had such success?	You're the best player on the team.
Nice work.	Good job.

4. **Embrace and allow your child to struggle from a young age.** Never do for a child what they can do for themselves! Helping an adult with something that they can do for themselves can be a kind and thoughtful gesture. Helping a child can destroy an important opportunity for them to learn something about and for themselves. Experience is not just the best teacher; it is really the only teacher! Appropriate struggle takes place when you discern that a child can accomplish a task, even if difficult and painful.

5. **Comfort hurt feelings or a hurt body with validation rather vs. fixing.** Allowing children to experience appropriate struggle and pain does not mean that we should embrace the philosophy of "Suck it up!" Validating feelings (without fixing) is a powerful way to communicate empathy and understanding, as well as confidence in your child's ability to overcome adversity. It can sound something like, "It can really hurt when you're not invited to a friend's party. How are you feeling?" Listening rather than fixing can be the best medicine. It provides for much needed connection, validation and empathy, and allows the child to begin to process their experience and draw their own conclusions. Too often adults jump in with advice or suggestions, which, no matter how accurate and practical, invite reactions like, "You just don't understand!" and leave the child feeling alone and powerless.