



Helping Kids Bounce Back

We can't shield our children from life's difficulties, but we can provide them with the tools to recover from disappointment.

By Jessica Williams

Photographs by Carolyn Soling Photography

Childhood has its fair share of heartaches. Not being invited to a birthday party, getting cut from the basketball team, failing a test...the list goes on. No child is immune from these types of challenges, but some children are able to handle them, and the emotional pain that follows, better than others.

Those who bounce back quickly exhibit that magical trait called resilience. But all children can become more resilient, and parents can help develop resilience starting when their children are very young, even infants.

What is resilience?

According to Aki Raymer, M.A., a transformative parenting coach and founder of Oakland-based Parenting Paths, resilience is the ability to tolerate difficult feelings and events—whether an everyday challenge or severe trauma—and continue to grow and thrive.

It can be considered a mindset, according to Dr. Kenneth Ginsburg. In *Building Resilience in Children and Teens*, Ginsburg emphasizes that resilience is not invulnerability or isolation from all risk. “Resilient people see challenges as opportunities. They do not seek problems, but they understand that they will ultimately be strengthened from them. Rather than engaging in self-doubt, catastrophic thinking, or victimization (*Why me?*), they seek solutions.”

Along with compassion, confidence, self-awareness, and humility, resilience is one trait GGGMG mom Danielle hopes to instill in her children. She often uses the term “pop back up” when her kids physically fall down so as not to dwell on their fall if there are no major issues. “Aside from physically making sure our kids...don't give up when they hurt themselves, [my partner and I] feel it is important [for them] to be resilient emotionally and socially as well,” Danielle says.

The study of resilience

Children who are resilient have certain attributes, such as flexibility, empathy, a sense of humor, and the ability to elicit positive responses from others. Some experts also include the ability to think abstractly and reflectively, a strong sense of independence and identity, and a sense of purpose and hopeful belief in a bright future.

Researchers have started focusing on resilience following earlier studies on the human response to trauma. They wanted to know the qualities of people who thrive even in the face of adversity, explains Dr. Laura Choate, author of the new book *Swimming Upstream: Parenting Girls for Resilience in a Toxic Culture*. “So instead of only studying what happens when children develop problems, researchers started to recognize the importance of studying why some children are resilient,” Choate says. “What helps them do well? What makes them different? And how can we promote those qualities in all children?”

Building resilience

Certain conditions in a child's family, school, or community can promote resilience, maintains Bonnie Benard, author of *Fostering Resiliency in Kids: Protective Factors in the Family, School, and Community*. Children who receive warm, affectionate care and support from at least one person form a sense of basic trust and safety. Children who are held to high expectations begin to believe that they are bright and capable. Children who are encouraged to participate meaningfully within the family (for example, by taking care of little brother or the family pet), school, or

community come to assume they are worthy.

Ultimately, developing children's resilience begins with providing a safe, nurturing environment and modeling behavior for them to observe. As they grow older, children can start problem-solving in order to generate their own solutions to adversity while using parents as sounding boards. Ways parents can build children's resilience include helping

Resilient children grow up to be adults who can successfully navigate life's bumpy road.

children regulate emotions and tolerate frustration, sharing failings, and paying attention to cultural messages.

Regulating emotions and tolerating frustration

Let's face it, keeping emotions in check is not an easy task, especially when you're 3 years old and you don't want to share your cheddar bunnies. Yet resilient children become adults who can successfully navigate life's bumpy road. Raymer notes that parents can help young children learn these not-so-easy skills.

First and foremost, parents should allow children to experience difficult feelings and situations without immediately rescuing them. “If a crawling baby gets stuck under a table and cries out,” says Raymer, “avoid running in and swooping him up, and instead coach him through getting out. Move a chair out of the way or offer ideas about how to get out. This teaches the baby that you are there to help, but gives him the satisfaction of figuring out how to get out of a tough situation on his own.”

Similarly, telling kids what they can do helps them learn to focus on solutions, which is important for resilience. If your child “pushes another child out of the way, say ‘Oh, it looks like you wanted him to move! You can say excuse me.’ By giving kids tools for how to behave rather than simply telling them what not to do, we prime them to become people who focus on solutions rather than getting stuck.”

Additionally, modeling empathy by validating a child's emotion helps the child understand his difficult feelings. “Big emotions can be confusing for kids,” Raymer

says. “When children act up, parents should start with acknowledging the emotion before correcting the behavior.” For instance, if a toddler throws a tantrum when leaving the playground, parents can start by showing understanding. Saying something like “You were having so much fun and you wish we could stay at the park all day!” teaches the child to better understand their feelings,

according to Raymer. “Most of the time feeling understood is the first step to being able to recover.” Parents who respond to their children's cues

sensitively and to their children's behavior appropriately and consistently are priming their children's brains for resilience.

Children as young as toddlers can also learn how to overcome adversity by listening to their parents work through their own hurdles. “You can verbalize your own self-talk about how you get through things,” says Dr. Jocelyn Cremer, Ph.D., a psychologist and co-founder of Potrero Hill Psychotherapy. That provides a way of thinking to model for the child and also shows a means to self-soothe.

Sharing failings

So maybe you didn't get the lead in your middle school play decades ago. Your older child will love to hear about it. When parents share their failings and how they handled them, children learn that everyone (even Mom!) struggles with adversity at some point, that it is temporary, and that there are ways to work through it. Even sharing daily ups and downs, or the “thorns” and “roses” of the day, as Cremer put it, helps children learn that failings are transitory.

Moreover, sharing failings teaches kids they don't have to be perfect. “Perfectionism can be very inflexible,” Cremer says, noting that part of resilience is the ability to handle failure. When parents share their failings while reiterating their optimism for the future, they help children build confidence and hope, important building blocks for resilience.

Pay attention to cultural messages

Speaking of perfectionism, today's children are facing incredible pressures to perform at very high levels, especially in academics and

athletics as they enter the teen years. Girls in particular may face additional pressures. Choate, whose book examines the pressures today's girls face, notes that "girls not only have pressure to look 'hot and sexy,' but also stay thin, maintain their relationships, and become accomplished at high levels. They have to do everything boys are expected to do and more, and accomplish it all perfectly." Moreover, according to Choate, social media pressures affect girls far more than boys, primarily because girls spend more time on social media and value their social media "numbers" such as likes, followers, friends, and re-tweets more than boys.

How can parents help develop a child's resilience to cultural pressures? "As a new parent, decide what you want for your child," Choate says. "What is most important to you? Then decide to make parenting decisions from those values and not from what you are hearing in popular culture about current parenting trends... For example, if you don't feel comfortable buying your child a certain toy or certain outfit, then don't do it, even if every other parent around you seems to be making those purchases."

Paying attention to cultural messages targeted at children is also important. "Walk down the toy aisle at a major retailer and notice the difference between the girls' and boys' toy rows," Choate says. "Notice that girls are being socialized...to look and act older than they are. It is too much, too soon. When you start paying attention, you can be better informed and equipped to make decisions about whether you want to participate in these cultural trends."

Although we parents cannot bear our children's heartaches or eliminate all cultural pressures, we can help develop their resilience. Every child can learn how to bounce back a little more quickly than before and be stronger for it. ♦

ADDITIONAL PARENTING RESOURCES:
American Psychological Association,
"Resilience Guide for Parents and Teachers."
www.apa.org/helpcenter/resilience.aspx

Jessica Williams remembers vividly the day she got a 37 percent on a high school math test. She lives in Noe Valley and has an almost 2-year-old daughter.

MOMS' CONCERNS

By Jessica Williams

As much as we'd like to shield our children from pain, social challenges and cultural pressures are inescapable. Here are some GGMG moms' responses when asked,

"What's your biggest concern for your daughter or son in today's culture?"

DAUGHTERS

"I think it's extremely important to make her confident and proud of being a woman, for her to understand the differences between genders, but not to accept the discrimination caused by these differences... Another thing I am very concerned [about] is sexual harassment...and not only the extreme cases. I am afraid of her experiencing anything that makes her uncomfortable."

—Mariana

"This is hard to answer as my daughter is only 10 months old. That said, one of my future concerns will certainly be gender equality. Not only when it comes to compensation and career growth, but also when it comes to men and women in managerial roles and how these managers are perceived. For example, a driven, direct, and successful female manager may be viewed as 'bossy'... A man exuding the same qualities is simply a successful manager who has worked his way up and knows what he's doing."—Shannon

SONS

"I don't have any particular concerns regarding raising a boy over a girl. It's important that he learns to treat others who are different than him with respect. I think that goes without saying for both genders though."—Nicolette

"I hope for my boy to be confident enough to stand for himself and at the same time to be confident enough to show his emotions. I think there is a big pressure on men to be stable and hide their insecurities and fears as if they don't even exist. I think it is very hard to live in such [a] way..."—Ludmila

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