

Practical Tips and Tools

Building Resilience

The Power to Cope With Adversity

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Many families face stressful situations, including parental depression or related mental illnesses, serious medical illness, community violence, and poverty. Adversities like these can be painful for the children in these families. But the hopeful news is that research on children facing such problems has shown that many children show resilience and do surprisingly well. Resilience is the ability to cope with the stress caused by such challenging situations. Dr. Ann Masten, one of the leading researchers on resilience, described it as “ordinary magic” (Masten, 2001) a quality that shows itself in children’s curiosity, in their ability to relate to others, and, above all, in their ability to survive and be successful even though their lives include many challenges. Two important ways that early childhood professionals can help parents and young children foster resilience include identifying strengths and building on resources.

Understanding Resilience

RESILIENCE CAN BE understood at four levels: the individual, the family, the school and caregiving system, and the larger community. Important qualities of resilience were identified in studies of older children who grew up with the stressor of a depressed parent and yet managed to do well.

At the individual level, these children were able to:

- **Engage in age-appropriate activities**, such as going to school

or participating in community or religious activities.

- **Relate to others**, including parents, siblings, other family members, peers, and other community members.
- **Understand their family life**, in particular, the fact that their parents were depressed and that they were not to blame. Repeatedly, these young people said that understanding that their parents had an illness, that it had a name, and that they were free to go on with their lives, helped them a great deal.

At the parenting level, despite the challenges they may be facing, many parents remain deeply committed to parenting, commonly saying things such as, “I will do what I need to do to take care of my child, even if I cannot do anything else.”

At the caregiving level, schools and health centers were vital in building strengths by providing care for those suffering from adversity.

At the larger community level, risk factors like community violence, unemployment, or lack of access to resources can make depression more likely. On the other hand, safe neighborhoods, strong social ties, and shared purpose can build resilience. In this sense, a strong and well-functioning early care and education program such as Early Head Start can be an important community resource against adversity and is in a key position to strengthen families.

What Promotes Resilience?

IT IS IMPORTANT to recognize resilience in children, in parents, and in oneself as a professional and to understand which systems in the community promote resilience. Resilience can be recognized and fostered at these four levels.

For the individual child:

- Supporting a child’s capacity to learn, to relate to others, to use imagination, and to see himself as part of a community.
- Developing a child’s awareness and regulation of his own feelings, as well as skills and strategies for letting other’s know how he feels.
- Encouraging children’s relationships with their peers, their caregivers, and their parents.

For families:

- Understanding the many cultural variations and different ways families can show strength and resilience is one of the great challenges and one of the great opportunities.
- Encouraging parents in their efforts to be more effective by having regular routines for their children to follow, maintaining appropriate limits, and engaging in positive parent-child interactions, such as reading together or talking about what happened during the day at school.

At the caregiving level:

- Encouraging consistent positive

attachments with children and making parents feel welcomed and comfortable.

- Understanding adversity and resilience in the families they work with can help teachers be a resource to families and more effective in their work.

At the community level:

- Understanding what exists and what is missing in community resources is an essential step to better parent outreach.
- Sharing knowledge and experience with families to find the right service or information from a variety of settings, including health clinics, schools, places of worship, and community centers.

The study of strengths and resilience in children has shown the importance of positive caregiving relationships and the capacity children have to change and adapt in the face of adversity. There is no one set result for children, even in the most difficult life situations. This knowledge provides hope for parents, but it is important to emphasize that schools, health clinics, and community centers can provide help and support.

Helping Parents Build Resilience

IT IS POSSIBLE to build family coping skills even while living under stressful conditions or during difficult times. Three key messages for parents are:

- “You and your child have strengths.” Parents welcome information about resilience. At the same time, many have trouble at first in accepting the notion of strengths. Asking parents what they like best about their child or what makes them happiest about their child is a good starting point.
- “Reflect on what you need.” Asking a parent “What do you need?” may seem simple, but many parents require support in understanding their needs before they can ask for resources. Encourage parents to think about how their current experience compares to how they would like things to be before asking them what resources they need. This means reflecting on “the now” and imagining “the future”—something that families facing adversity may find difficult to do. Depressed parents may need extra support when trying to imagine their options because depression can make it challenging for a person to think beyond their day-to-day coping. Building trust in their relationships with families is an important strategy for professionals to encourage reflection. Another important activity is, over time, helping families to

remember the strategies that work for them and use them.

- “Take care of yourself.” Many times, parents will move toward changing their lives in the name of being a better parent. Let parents know that energy invested in self-care can have positive results for their children as well. Encourage parents to consider how they are taking care of themselves. Offer examples of “first steps” for better self-care. For instance, a goal to change one’s diet can be started by eating more fresh vegetables or cutting back on candy. A goal to exercise more can start with taking the stairs rather than the elevator.

On a daily basis, parents can build their child’s resilience by:

Teaching self-care: Making time for healthy eating, exercise, and rest supports parents’ efforts to feel strong and teaches a child good habits to last throughout his lifetime.

Emphasizing the positive: Helping parents remember and celebrate important events either within the family or in the larger culture is another important way to build resilience. Singing songs with children, drawing pictures with them, looking at photographs together, acknowledging important holidays such as Martin Luther King’s birthday or Thanksgiving can help.

Building a strong parent–child bond: Developing a consistent, loving bond by showing affection and responding to a child’s needs can help her feel secure and support the parents’ effectiveness.

Reading together: Sharing books and stories has numerous benefits for children and parents, including language and literacy learning, creating routines, and fostering a love of learning and discovery through books. Books are also great tools that can open and support conversations about positive feelings and difficult events experienced by either the child or the family.

Encouraging social skills: Teaching children how to make friends and reaching out to your own friends can help your child see what it means to be friendly and learn to get along with others. Make time for and encourage children to play with peers and participate in positive group activities such as sports or clubs.

Maintaining a daily routine: Knowing what to expect can be comforting to children and adults. Keeping a routine and following simple daily rituals such as reading a story each night together before bedtime can also be reassuring.

Nurturing positive self-esteem: It is important to build upon strengths. Parents can help their child to trust himself and to try new activities by complimenting his

successes and helping him to learn from his hardships.

Practicing self-reflection: Taking time to reflect on life is one of the most important things parents can do to gain perspective and problem-solve. Some ways to cultivate productive self-reflection include keeping a journal or talking with others about positive events or getting through difficult times. Creative projects such as taking photos, creating artwork, or making music and sharing those art forms with children provide meaningful opportunities for reflection and communication across the family.

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Reference

- MASTEN, A. (2001). Ordinary magic: Resilience processes in development. *American Psychologist*, 56, 227–238.

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