Raising a Resilient Child

There are countless social and emotional stresses on today's children. School problems, exposure to violence, sexual pressure, peer pressure, family dysfunction, illness and enormous pressures to succeed all conspire to challenge a young person's sense of self and security.

Resiliency is a character trait that best describes how one copes with adversity, intense or persistent stress, tragedy or simply the unexpected. Resilient children are those who maintain their composure and sense of well-being despite adverse circumstances. Why are some children highly resilient while others are not? No one knows for sure.

Common stresses, such as failing grades, humiliation at the hand of a peer, or a break-up with a boyfriend, will definitely trigger negative feelings in a young person. Non-resilient kids often internalize these events and overreact by saying, "I'm stupid," or "Nobody likes me." These negative self-statements are called *cognitive distortions*, which means that the child attaches much more significance to the event than is reasonably called for. In the case of severe adversity or tragedy, such as the loss of a loved one or being a victim of violence, the non-resilient child is at greater risk for developing acute stress disorder, anxiety or depressive symptoms.

Highly resilient children, on the other hand, often feel hurt, but the wound is not able to penetrate their self-esteem. Highly resilient children seem to have an uncanny confidence that things will work out in the end.

Family functioning

Family functioning has an enormous impact on the resiliency of children. For example, protecting your child from exposure to overwhelming stress is a natural, parental instinct. However, this does not mean you should try to keep your child from experiencing normal, often healthy, life stressors. This is how he will learn to cope and overcome problems. Accordingly, over protection can leave a child ill equipped to cope with the realities of life. On the other hand, children who experience too much stress, too early in life often develop maladaptive ways of solving problems, such as throwing temper tantrums, hitting or lying to get what they want.

Children need to know that they can trust their parents to protect them from danger and to talk with them when they are troubled. Children who have this foundation of trust have been shown to be more confident and resilient than children who are not secure in their families.

Helpful tips

Here are some things that parents can do to foster resiliency in their children:

- Observe how your child handles stressful situations. If she responds with fear, assure her that you are there to help, encourage and protect her.
- Set a good example. Demonstrate self-control and coping skills.
- Don't overload your child with too many after school activities and responsibilities.
- Role-play a stressful situation with your child. Help him figure out a constructive way to solve a problem.
- Teach her to transfer coping strategies from one area of life to other situations.
- Use humor to buffer bad feelings and situations. A child who learns to use humor will be better able to keep things in perspective.
- When you are under extra stress, check to be sure that you are not passing it along to your child.

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