

Building Resilience in our Children

Adults often view childhood as a carefree, joyful time. Unfortunately, our children will face traumas, stress and emotional upset. While children may face a variety of difficulties, their ability to overcome any of these challenges depends on their skills of resilience. Middle school can be a particularly difficult time for children as they struggle with academic demands and adjusting to new social expectations. They look to the adults in their lives to help them feel safe.

The American Psychological Association defines resilience as “the ability to adapt well to adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or even significant sources of stress”. Being resilient doesn’t mean our children won’t face adversity or stress, but resiliency skills will help them process these challenges and grow stronger. Resilient individuals are also less likely to abuse alcohol or drugs and more likely to experience success.

Five factors that influence resilience:

1. Sense of humor- being able to laugh in the face of difficulty lowers stress levels and allows a child to overcome the situation more quickly.
2. Problem solving skills – looking at a difficult situation as a problem that can be solved allows a child to feel empowered.
3. Sense of future- when a child can imagine life beyond current circumstances and see himself in that future situation, it makes those circumstances less daunting.
4. Social competence- children who feel comfortable navigating social situations are less likely to find themselves in confrontational situations.
5. Mentors- positive adult role models present in a child’s life help to model appropriate responses to situations. These don’t have to be long term contacts, they can be people who are influential for days, weeks, months or years—all positive adult contacts have benefit.



We can all cultivate resilience, both in ourselves and in our children. The American Psychological Association [Resilience Guide for Parents and Teachers](#) offers some practical tips to help us build resilience:

Parenting Power Tips for Building Resilience in Children and Teens

- **Make connections** -Teach your child how to make friends, including the skill of empathy, or feeling another’s pain. Encourage your child to be a friend in order to get friends. Connecting with people provides social support and strengthens resilience.
- **Help your child by having him or her help others** -Children who may feel helpless can be empowered by helping others. Engage your child in age-appropriate volunteer work, or ask for assistance yourself with some task that he or she can master.
- **Maintain a daily routine** -Sticking to a routine can be comforting to children, especially younger children who crave structure in their lives. Encourage your child to develop his or her own routines.
- **Take a break** -While it is important to stick to routines, endless worrying can be counter-productive. Teach your child how to focus on something besides what’s worrying him. Be aware of what your child is exposed to that can be troubling (i.e. news, internet, overheard conversations, etc.) and make sure your child takes a break from those things if they trouble her.
- **Teach your child self-care** -Make yourself a good example, and teach your child the importance of making time to eat properly, exercise and rest. Make sure your child has time to have fun, and make sure that your child hasn’t scheduled every moment of his or her life with no “down time” to relax. Caring for oneself and even having fun will help your child stay balanced and better deal with stressful times.
- **Move toward your goals** -Teach your child to set reasonable goals and then to move toward them one step at a time. Moving toward that goal — even if it’s a tiny step — and receiving praise for doing so will focus your child on what he or she has accomplished rather than on what hasn’t been accomplished, and can help build the resilience to move forward in the face of challenges.
- **Nurture a positive self-view** -Help your child remember ways that he has successfully handled hardships in the past and then help him understand that these past challenges help him build the strength to handle future challenges. Teach your child to see the humor in life, and the ability to laugh at himself.
- **Keep things in perspective and maintain a hopeful outlook** -Even when your child is facing very painful events, help him look at the situation in a broader context and keep a long-term perspective. Although your child may be too young to consider a long-term look on his own, help him see that there is a future beyond the current situation and that the future can be good. An optimistic and positive outlook enables your child to see the good things in life and keep going even in the hardest times.
- **Look for opportunities for self-discovery** -Tough times are often the times when children learn the most about themselves. Help your child take a look at the situation as a way of recognizing the skills she has that can help her through the difficulty.
- **Accept that change is part of living** -Change often can be scary for children and teens. Help your child see that change is part of life and new goals can replace goals that have become unattainable.
- **Seek assistance if the situation doesn’t improve**- Sometimes a situation is difficult to handle within the family. The Power of Choice [Parent Resource Page](#) provides websites and local resources to help you get the help your family might need. Naperville Area Chamber of Commerce lists local [counseling options](#) and KidsMatter offers a local [Resource Guide](#).

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