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Raising Resilient Kids

We've all heard about remarkable children who live through such adverse life experiences as poverty, abuse and neglect and emerge unscathed. What is it about these children that allows them to prevail emotionally through whatever punches life throws them, and what as parents can we do to cultivate such resiliency in our own children? The answer is: Plenty. While many characteristics of naturally resilient children are innate, there are steps parents can follow to foster a bounce-back attitude in their children.

From failing to make the football team to divorce or death in the family, these techniques can help children deal with life's ups and downs. The resilient child recognizes a stressful event, often responds emotionally, recoils temporarily then bounces back and returns to a prior emotional state, figuring out in his own way what he can do to manage the difficult situation.

Consider 10-year-old Matthew, who one day received the news that his beloved grandfather who lived next door unexpectedly dies. Not only were Grandpa and Matt buddies, but also Grandpa was Matt's after-school caregiver. Matthew retreated immediately in tears to his bedroom. Dad followed and they cried together until Matthew fell asleep.

The next day and days following, Matthew located and displayed pictures of Grandpa. He talked with friends about their deceased grandparents, asked for a few mementos of Grandpa's and even participated in his funeral. With the support from his parents, he started to solve the problem of who would now care for him after school. Matt displayed resilient behavior.

Attributes of the Resilient Child

- **Has Good Problem-Solving Skills:** From the preschool years on, resilient children display an interest in finding solutions to problems rather than giving up or depending on others to manage situations for them. They're task and solution oriented.
- **Has An Internal Locus of Control:** Resilient children believe in their own effectiveness. Although external events may have caused their problem, they assume responsibility for a solution. They don't consider themselves victims.
- **Elicits Support From Others:** The resilient child has the uncanny knack of finding a nurturing person in or outside the family to support him through troubled times. It's a magical combination of independence coupled with an ability to ask for help when needed.
- **Cultivates an Interest or Hobby:** When the resilient child faces turmoil, he turns to a hobby or a special interest for solace. It might be cooking, computer games, or a baseball card collection that brings the world back into focus, plus builds competency and provides a source of pride to share with others.
- **Has an Optimistic View of Life:** Resiliency goes along with a faith that things will work out as well as can be reasonably expected, and negative events can be surmounted, thus giving meaning to life and a reason for commitment and caring.
- **Is Helpful to Others:** By late elementary school the resilient child works to carry out socially desirable tasks to prevent others in the family, neighborhood, or community from experiencing distress or discomfort.
- **Has Effective Communication Skills:** The resilient child effectively communicates problems and feelings, thus gaining positive attention, backing and ideas from interested friends, family and adults.
- **Uses Intellectual Gifts Effectively:** The resilient child is not necessarily intellectually gifted, but each uses his talents optimally, working to reach his potential. If the child is intelligent and scholastically competent, these are positively associated with the ability to overcome great odds.

Teaching Your Kids to Bounce Back

Even though your natural parenting instinct might be to run interference when your children experience turmoil, softening a blow by managing a difficult situation for them, it might be more important that you cultivate attributes of resiliency. Then when your children do face hardship from which you can't protect them, they won't, from fragile character, permanently retreat, display needy behavior, cease to mature along their developmental timeline, or become depressed.

How would your child manage such upheaval or, even worse, more stressful and sorrowful childhood experiences? The following are some steps you can take to help your child.

Here's how:

Build Emotional Strength:

When your child responds with fear, anger, disappointment or sadness, identify the emotion he's feeling. Convey understanding or empathy and stay with your child until he returns to his emotional equilibrium.

Build Problem-solving Skills:

Once emotions subside, identify the problem and ask your child what she can do to solve the problem. Validate the child's ideas. Offer a few suggestions, but don't dominate. Encourage your child to use her own resources to manage the situation, even if her solution may seem somewhat immature to you.

Develop an Internal Locus of Control:

When your child faces hardship, don't victimize him with a "poor you" approach. Instead, validate the difficulty of the situation but exude confidence that he can figure out a way to manage the situation effectively.

Encourage Your Child to Elicit Support:

When troubles arise, assist your child to ask for help from a teacher, coach, clergy, friend, community support person or expert. Then take this attribute one step further by prompting your child to help others.

Support Your Child's Hobbies:

Don't view hobbies as a frivolous past time. See them as a source of pride that your child can call on when part of her world seems to be falling apart. Your job is to show interest and assist your child to cultivate the hobby on her terms.

Offer An Optimistic View of Life:

Your modeling is most effective here. When problems arise, recognize them, but point out any silver lining in the troubled cloud. Help your child see that in time things will get better and life will again offer many moments of happiness.

Encourage Communication:

Learn to listen to your children and encourage them to express their feelings and opinions. Invite them to describe troubling situation.

Promote Academic and Intellectual Excellence:

Do your best to talk positively about the benefits of these two pursuits both in and out of school. Certainly there needs to be a balance for children between stressful events and having enough protective factors in place to help them cope. For any child, when troubles outweigh the protective factors, even the most resilient child can develop problems.

And in order for children to bounce back from difficult childhood situations, it's essential for them to have a close relationship with at least one emotionally healthy adult in or outside the family. And it is up to that person to help the child gain the belief that he or she has everything necessary to be successful and overcome adversity. Children given responsibility at home and at school learn firsthand that they are worthy and capable. If you challenge but don't overwhelm your child, the result is good behavioral health and resiliency.