

Raising Resilient Children

One of the most important tasks of parenthood is helping children learn to deal with their emotions. All children experience periods of stress in their lives and need the emotional skills to deal with it. Children's emotional resilience, or ability to cope with their feelings, is important to their long-term happiness, wellbeing and success in life. Emotional resilience involves six key skills: recognising and accepting feelings, expressing feelings appropriately, having a positive outlook, developing effective ways of coping, being able to deal with negative feelings, and being able to manage stressful life events. This tip sheet provides some ideas on how to help children become emotionally resilient.

WHAT IS EMOTIONAL RESILIENCE?

Emotional resilience refers to the ability to manage feelings and cope with day-to-day stresses as well as major life events. This includes being able to recognise, understand and accept feelings, and express them in appropriate ways that do not harm others. It also involves being able to face and resolve unpleasant situations and cope with very stressful or upsetting events.

Children have different temperaments and some are more sensitive or emotionally expressive than others. However, it is important for all children to learn to manage emotions. Their ability to recognise, understand and deal with different emotions develops gradually.

WHY IS EMOTIONAL RESILIENCE IMPORTANT?

Children need to cope with everyday feelings, both positive and negative, such as excitement, anticipation, frustration and disappointment. All children experience stressful times in their lives, like preparing for tests or competitions. Some children have very upsetting things happen to them, such as parents separating, or death in the family. It is important for children to learn how to deal with such experiences.

Being able to cope with emotions is important for long-term happiness, wellbeing and success in life. Emotional resilience affects our relationships with others, and is related to tolerance and compassion, personal coping, and the prevention of emotional problems.

When children become emotionally resilient there are many benefits for them. They are more likely to be:

- Caring and socially skilled.
- Empathic and sensitive to the needs of others.
- Able to manage emotions and move through negative feelings to feel better again.

- Able to cope with stress, like exams, and unpleasant experiences, like painful medical procedures.

They are also less likely to resort to unhelpful ways of coping, such as acting out or misbehaving, avoiding or denying a problem, or relying on others to solve their problems or give them lots of sympathy.

BUILDING BLOCKS

The building blocks for becoming emotionally resilient involve learning to:

- Recognise, understand and accept feelings.
- Express feelings appropriately.
- Develop a positive outlook, including being optimistic, interested in things, and content.
- Develop effective ways of coping.
- Deal with negative feelings and unpleasant situations.
- Manage particularly stressful life events.

These skills can be encouraged as children develop.



RECOGNISING AND ACCEPTING FEELINGS

From infancy, children experience different emotional states (e.g. contentment, pleasure, discomfort and distress). As children move through their preschool and primary school years they become better able to recognise, talk about and understand how they feel and how others may feel. This involves being aware of a feeling (e.g. anxiety) and having the words to describe it (e.g. afraid). Their feelings may also become more complex as they grow up.

This developmental progression is related to children's language, thinking and experiences. However, there are many things parents can do to help children learn to recognise, understand and accept different feelings.

▽ Accept Different Emotions

Firstly, it is important to accept that it is normal and healthy to feel ups and downs. It is not possible or healthy to try to protect children from any upset. Let your child know that it is okay to have different feelings and to show them.

▽ Talk About Feelings

Talk to your child about emotions and how to recognise them — in themselves and in other people. Also talk about the reasons for these feelings.

▽ Share Your Own Feelings

Be emotionally expressive. Children learn a lot about emotions by watching their parents' faces and gestures. Faces provide clues about how someone is feeling. If young children see expressive faces, they learn what they mean; for example, that smiling and laughing are related to happy feelings.

Talk to your child about your own feelings. Share stories about times you felt different emotions (e.g. happy, excited, nervous, sad, angry or annoyed). Explain the reasons you

felt this way and talk about what you did to deal with any negative feelings.

▼ Help Your Child Recognise Emotions

When your child shows an emotion, ask how they feel. If they have trouble telling you, try to describe the emotion for them — *It sounds like you felt pretty disappointed about not being chosen for Katharina's team.* This will help them recognise the emotion and also why they feel the way they do.

You can help children understand different emotions through books, stories, fantasy play, drama, art and music. Children can become more aware of their emotions when expressiveness is encouraged.

EXPRESSING FEELINGS APPROPRIATELY

It is important for children to learn how to express emotions appropriately, such as what words, expressions and actions are okay. Parents can also help children learn when to express their feelings, such as who they could talk to, how often and how much.

It is also important for children to learn what is not appropriate. For their own safety, children need to know that it is not okay to be affectionate to people they do not know well, such as hugging strangers. They also need to learn about socially inappropriate ways of expressing feelings, such as losing control and yelling, or hurtful actions like hitting or abusing others.

Acceptable ways of expressing emotions are related to cultural and family expectations. It is important for children to learn about culture through rituals and traditions relating to emotions. For example, weddings, funerals and festivals can teach children how their family and culture deal with celebration and loss.

There are a number of traps parents can fall into that accidentally encourage children's emotional distress:

- Talking too much about their own feelings and troubles.
- Dwelling on their child's upsetting experiences.
- Showing too much interest in how a child feels.
- Over-reacting to minor upsets, like small bumps or grazes.
- Being overly sympathetic.
- Encouraging avoidance.
- Not giving enough attention to contentment, coping or courageous behaviour.

Here are some tips for encouraging children to express their feelings appropriately.

▼ Help Your Child Talk About Feelings

Parents can help children feel comfortable to talk about their feelings in many ways:

- Ask your child how they feel about events that have happened to them.
- When your child starts to tell you about their experiences or feelings, stop what you are doing and listen carefully.
- Summarise what your child shares with you — *It sounds like you feel very pleased with that performance* — or — *You felt really angry when Tommy pushed you off the swing, didn't you?*
- Avoid telling your child how they should feel, such as saying there is nothing to worry about or that they should not feel the way they do. Instead, try to acknowledge their feelings.
- Read children's books about happy and upsetting events. Use the stories and illustrations to talk about how the characters feel.
- Help your child recognise feelings in others. Ask how they think another person might feel.

▼ Reward Appropriate Expression of Feelings

It is important to give children positive attention for expressing their feelings and managing difficult or upsetting situations in appropriate ways. Tell your child what you liked — *You and Sam looked really happy together today. You're such a nice friend letting him share your things* — or — *I thought you handled your anger really well today when Ben kept pushing in. You stayed really calm and worked out a good compromise about taking turns.*

▼ Deal With Inappropriate Expression of Feelings

Parents need to decide how to deal with their child when upset feelings turn into angry, hurtful or disrespectful behaviour, like yelling, swearing or hitting others.

Through consistent consequences, children can learn about inappropriate and acceptable ways of expressing their feelings. Here are some suggestions:

- Acknowledge the upset before dealing with the problem behaviour — *I can see you are very disappointed about not being able to go to Bella's today.*
- Tell your child what to stop doing, briefly say why, and tell your child what to do instead — *Stop yelling at me, it is not nice to yell at people. Calm yourself down ... Sit down and take a deep breath.*

- A logical consequence, quiet time or time-out may be a suitable back-up consequence if problem behaviour continues.

Parents can also model better ways of expressing upset feelings. When you are annoyed or upset about something, avoid yelling. Show your child how to keep calm and deal with the situation assertively.

BUILDING A POSITIVE OUTLOOK

Children's feelings are related to what they think about and tell themselves, and the experiences they have. Parents can help children develop positive ways of thinking about themselves and the world.

Optimistic thinking is a key life skill. When children have hopes and dreams for the future and look for the positives in their experiences, they are less likely to feel down, powerless or defeated. It is important for children to develop goals to work towards and to use their initiative. If they experience achievement and success, they become more confident in their abilities.

Curiosity and exploration can also lead to a positive outlook. If children learn to take an interest in the world around them, and learn to find things to do, they are less likely to be bored or negative.

It is also important for children to develop a sense of contentment. This may involve satisfaction with what they have; empathy for others; acceptance of things that cannot be changed; and enjoying peaceful times, doing very little. Children who develop these skills learn to appreciate their world.

▼ Encourage Optimism

Optimistic thinking is related to confidence and emotional wellbeing. Here are some suggestions for encouraging optimism:

- Model being optimistic rather than pessimistic. If children hear lots of optimistic comments, they will begin to think this way themselves.
- Encourage your child to set goals and work out how to achieve them.
- Encourage your child to use initiative and be creative.
- Encourage involvement in activities where your child can experience success.
- Look for explanations for events that show your child has some control.
- Say what your child did well before you point out things they could do better.
- Talk about the 'good side' of events and experiences.

▼ Encourage Curiosity

Curiosity helps children learn. Curious children ask lots of questions and are interested in the world around them and how things work. Here are some suggestions to encourage your child's curiosity:

- Prompt your child to decide on activities they would like to do.
- Let your child explore. Show interest and excitement about things you discover together. For example, comment on animals you see and how they behave, and talk about senses (e.g. colours, sounds, tastes, smells and sensations). This will promote your child's awareness and appreciation of their world.
- Be available when your child wants to show you something. Stop what you are doing, show your interest and prompt them to talk about it.
- Ask questions and make comments about your child's activities, creations and interests.
- Teach your child how to find information, such as by using maps, books, computers and libraries.

▼ Encourage Contentment

Encouraging contentment involves helping children to be accepting, tolerant and appreciative of what they have. Here are some ideas for encouraging contentment:

- Model being appreciative and grateful. For example, say *Thank you* when someone does something for you, and comment on things of beauty.
- Ask your child to talk about the highlight of their day. They may not want to talk about this straight after school. Give them time to relax first.
- Create and talk about shared family experiences and happy childhood memories.
- Encourage empathy by discussing other people's point of view.
- Discuss acceptance of things that cannot be changed. Sometimes children feel envious of others and complain about their situation (e.g. not having new clothes) or physical appearance (e.g. having curly/straight hair). Acknowledge their feelings and gently encourage them to accept what they do have and not dwell on things they cannot change.
- Create opportunities for your child to experience achievement and belonging. Foster their involvement in meaningful activities and groups (e.g. art, music, sport or clubs).

- Encourage your child to slow down sometimes and take time just to be still and take in the world around them, like stargazing or looking at fish in a pond. In the beginning they may enjoy this more if it is shared time with a parent.

DEVELOPING COPING SKILLS

Coping skills are the skills children can learn to help them deal with negative emotions. These skills include problem solving, positive self-talk, relaxing, and looking for support or asking for help when they need it.

▼ Help Your Child Become a Problem Solver

Children learn a lot about problem solving through watching. Set a good example and let your child see how you deal with problems. Involve your child in family problem solving discussions. Talk about how you can break a problem down into smaller parts that can be worked out one at a time. Play games that promote thinking and problem solving.

Rather than solving all problems as a parent, encourage your child to work at solving their own problems. Encourage them to find answers themselves by asking for their ideas. Prompt them to think how they or a friend may have solved a problem like this in the past, or to think about what a hero of theirs might do. Congratulate your child when they solve a problem on their own.

You can teach your child the steps in problem solving:

- State the problem clearly.
- Come up with some possible solutions.
- Think about the good points and bad points of the possible solutions.
- Decide on the best solution or plan.
- Try it out by putting the plan into action.
- Review how the solution worked and make any necessary changes.

▼ Encourage Positive Thinking

Parents can do many things to encourage positive thinking and self-talk. Here are some suggestions:

- Ask your child to evaluate their efforts — what they did well and what they would like to do differently next time.
- Explain how thinking about the same thing in different ways affects how you feel.
- Play games and prompt your child to imagine what someone might be thinking and feeling.
- Point out helpful and unhelpful ways of thinking about a situation. Encourage

your child to practise helpful ways of thinking — *I can do this* — or — *I did better this time*.

- Model using positive self-talk to cope with your own stress or negative feelings.

▼ Help Your Child Learn To Relax

Provide a good model of how to manage stress by looking after yourself and taking time to relax. Help your child find ways to relax that work for them; for example:

- Taking slow, deep breaths.
- Relaxing their muscles.
- Listening to a relaxation tape or calming music.

▼ Help Your Child Look for Support

Discuss with your child how everyone needs to talk about their feelings, especially when they feel bad. Talk about how you get support from others when you feel bad. If your child does not want to talk to you about their feelings, help them find someone to talk to, such as a trusted family member, friend, teacher or counsellor.

DEALING WITH NEGATIVE FEELINGS

Negative emotions are part of everyday experiences, but they do not need to become extreme if children learn to manage these feelings. Common negative emotions include anger, anxiety, boredom, disappointment, distress, guilt, jealousy, loneliness, loss, rejection and sadness.

It is not possible to completely protect children from these feelings. In fact, many emotions are short-lived and pass quickly without parents needing to do anything.

When children are upset as a response to discipline, it is best to ignore their protests, continue with the consequence, and let them settle on their own.

When children are distressed at other times, parents can calmly assist and prompt problem solving. Parents can also work on helping children learn to resolve negative feelings without needing an adult to intervene.

▼ Help Your Child Manage Negative Emotions

Here are some steps parents can take to help a child when they are distressed:

- Recognise when your child is upset.
- Stop what you are doing and pay attention.
- Ask your child what is wrong and encourage them to tell you what happened.
- Listen to what your child has to say.
- Summarise what you have heard, to check you have understood.

- Acknowledge their feelings — name the emotion and let your child know it is okay to feel upset.
- Share a recent example of your own (if appropriate).
- Ask how they would like to deal with the situation and if they would like you to do anything to help.
- When appropriate, coach your child to problem solve for themselves.
- If the upset continues, suggest a 'cooling off' period and distract your child onto another activity.
- Stay calm and avoid getting angry or upset yourself.
- Talk about the incident later, when your child has settled down.

▼ Help Your Child Learn To Cope on Their Own

Parents can also help children learn to deal with negative emotions on their own. For example, to help a child learn to deal with anxiety:

- Set a good example by staying calm and modelling how you face and cope with worries.
- Talk with your child about their anxious feelings to help them recognise and understand the emotion.
- Teach your child coping strategies like positive self-talk, relaxation and distraction.
- Encourage your child to face their fears gradually, in small steps where they can achieve success.
- Remain calm when your child is anxious and prompt them to use their coping strategies.
- Praise your child for their efforts and achievements in facing their fears.

COPING WITH STRESSFUL LIFE EVENTS

There are many different types of stressful events that children may experience, such as:

- Change, like moving house or changing schools.
- Problems with peers, like being bullied or being left out.
- Major disappointments, like getting poor marks or not being selected after trying out for a team or club.
- Frightening experiences, like being approached by a stranger or witnessing an accident.

- Loss, such as the death of a family member or pet.
- Parents separating or going through a divorce.
- Joining a new family, such as a step-family, adoptive family or foster family.
- Trauma, such as through family violence or abuse.
- Becoming seriously ill or having a loved one with a serious illness.
- Experiencing a natural disaster, like fire, severe storm or flood.
- Terrifying experiences, such as witnessing murder or acts of terrorism — directly or via the media.

Remember, children's understanding and experience of such events will vary in different stages of development.

▼ Help Your Child Cope With Stressful Events

When children are distressed by a major event, it is important for parents to reassure them of their safety and to be available to them to help them work through the crisis. Here are some tips:

- Allow your child to be upset.
- Ask your child to talk about why they are upset.
- Say something positive about the situation if you can.
- Reassure your child (where appropriate) about their safety.
- Do not take over and feel you have to solve their problem or ease their feelings completely.
- After they have had a chance to talk, suggest something they might like to do to cheer themselves up.
- Encourage your child to use their coping skills.
- Check later how they are feeling and give them attention when they have calmed down.

- Seek professional advice if the stressful event has long-term effects on you or your child.

▼ Example: Moving House

Children cope best with change when they are prepared for it in advance. For example, moving house can be both an exciting and an upsetting time, and parents can help by preparing children. Here are some tips:

- Explain why the move is necessary and talk about its advantages.
- Familiarise your child with the new situation.
- Get your child involved in local activities and setting up their new room.
- Maintain routines as much as possible.
- Help your child keep in touch with old friends if they wish.

▼ Example: Dealing With Loss

In other situations it is not possible to prepare in advance, such as when children experience loss. Here are some tips to help children through difficult times:

- Consider your child's developmental level and their experience of the loss.
- Reassure your child and encourage them to express their feelings in appropriate ways.
- Talk about the situation, what caused it and how it will affect them, such as what will change in the future.
- Maintain routines as much as possible.
- Talk about feelings and coping, and share memories.

Parents feel loss too. Try to look after yourself and find support. If the loss is affecting your ability to take care of your child, arrange for another adult to look after them until you feel better.

TAKE HOME MESSAGES

Coping with emotions is important for happiness, wellbeing and success in life.

Help your child recognise, understand and accept feelings.

Encourage your child to express feelings in appropriate ways.

Help your child develop a positive outlook.

Teach your child coping skills.

Help your child learn to deal with negative feelings and cope with stressful life events.

FOR FURTHER HELP If you have any questions or have tried these strategies and are concerned about your child's progress, contact the service where you were given this tip sheet or contact:

Triple P is a parenting program developed by Professor Matthew R. Sanders and colleagues in the Parenting and Family Support Centre, School of Psychology at The University of Queensland

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