

Helping children build inner strength to cope with the 'ups and downs' of growing up is one of the best things parents can do.

Having the confidence and skills to face, overcome or even be strengthened by hardship is a powerful thing to teach them.

Researchers have looked at what helps some people to manage difficult times when others don't cope well. This guide looks at the things that can be stressful for children, because the first step towards coping is to try to protect children from major stresses where possible. It also looks at the things that we know will help build all children's strengths—whether they have big stresses or not.

## What is resilience?

Resilience is a person's ability to cope with living in spite of stresses. It's about coping with problems and building strengths that protect and promote well-being.

If children have a lot of adverse things happening in their lives there will always be some effect on their well-being, but we now know much more about the things that will help protect them.

In any group of children who have been faced with big challenges or problems in their lives, there are some who grow up able to cope with living and caring for themselves and others who have long term difficulties.

We cannot always prevent things going wrong for our children, but we can help them build strengths so that they are more able to successfully face challenges and setbacks.

**Some people not only face and overcome a difficult situation, they can even be strengthened by it.**

## What children need to build resilience?

Resilience is built on three main building blocks:

**I CAN... make a difference.** I can:

- talk to others about things that frighten or bother me
- find someone to help me when I need it
- find ways to solve problems
- control myself when needed.

**I AM... a worthwhile person.** I am:

- loved and loveable
- happy to do nice things for others and show I care
- respectful of others and myself
- willing to be responsible for what I do.

**I HAVE... people around I trust and who love and support me.** They:

- show me how to do things right
- want me to learn to do things on my own
- help me when I am sick or in trouble
- will keep me safe.



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## What children need to build resilience *continued*

### Some of the things that children need:

- families (in all the many forms)
- supervision, limit setting and support
- to make a contribution
- to feel they can succeed
- to feel good about themselves
- to try new things
- to feel included and appreciated
- other people for support
- to feel they can count on you
- a sense of optimism
- people they can look up to
- to learn to persist
- a sense of humour.

### Some things that are stressful for children

Here are some of the bigger life events that are stressful:

- Birth injury or being very small at birth.
- Parents (or others close to them) are ill or die.
- Disability—their own, another child in the family or a parent.
- Family break-up—separation or divorce.
- A new baby being born when the child is very young (under two).
- If parents see child as 'difficult'.
- Parents fighting or violence in the home.
- Abuse—physical, sexual, emotional or neglect.
- Too many changes in a child's life, for example, schools, teachers, where they live and who care for them.
- Car accidents.
- Catastrophes—events like bushfires, floods, war.

**Children should feel loved and loveable, be respectful and responsible and know to whom they can turn in times of need.**

**Children should see mistakes as a basis for learning—too much protection from disappointment and failure may not give children the chance to learn how to deal with their mistakes or difficult situations.**

## What parents can do

### Help children feel they are loved and belong

One of the most important things is a sense of belonging. The first year especially is so important. From the start babies need to know that someone or some people really care and will always be there for them. These people can be mother and/or father, a grandparent or another reliable person who cares for them a lot.

Becoming attached to another person besides the parent does not mean that children will be less attached to their parents. In fact it is the opposite. When children learn to belong in this way it gives them the ability to make attachments, trust others and be able to form relationships with other people in their life. If parents are sick or not available for some reason, having someone else is very important for a child's healthy development.

### Allow comforters

Comforters such as dummies, blankets or special toys situations or separations from parents, such as bedtime or when they go to childcare. Usually they are ready to give them up by the time they are three or four, but not always. (If your child needs a comforter a lot of the time when he is at school there may be something else going on in his life that is worrying him.)

### Support your child's self-esteem

Children need to feel good about themselves. They learn self-esteem from birth, even before they know who they are. They learn it because someone is there for them and comes when they cry, comforts them when they are lonely and responds to their little noises.

When a baby makes little noises and a parent copies and makes the noises back, it says to the baby that she has been heard and noticed. All this helps to develop her self-esteem.

In childhood and adolescence, children need to know that they are loved because of who they are (not just when they have done something that pleases the parent). They need to feel they have a place in the family—and that they will be missed if they are away and they have a part in what needs to be done, for example, family chores.

Children need you to:

- spend time with them
- support their interests
- show you care—with actions and words
- show you are interested in what they have to say—even when you don't agree.

## What parents can do *cont*

### Build your child's self control

Children need to develop a sense of being able to manage things for themselves as they grow up. They can start learning this from babyhood. There are lots of ways that you can teach them this kind of confidence.

- Attend to the needs of your baby and respond to your baby's cries and little noises.
- Smile and clap when your baby does something for himself.
- Allow your toddler to try (so he feels good about managing new things) and to say 'No' (within reasonable limits).
- Show delight in what your child is learning.
- Help him to learn to do things for himself instead of you always having the answers.
- Give your child choices and then be prepared to let him have his choice.
- Ask your child's opinion about things that are to do with him (you do not always have to do what he says but help him to feel that he has some say).
- Start to teach him to solve his own problems. For example, if two children quarrel you can get them to listen to each other's feelings. Then ask them to think about what they could do to try and fix the problem. They might need some ideas or help to get started.
- Give approval and encouragement for trying new things and for getting something right, even if your child doesn't get it all right at first. For example, if your daughter is learning to put her shoes on and she gets them on the wrong feet, you can tell her that you are pleased that she has tried and managed to get them on. Then you can help her with the next step of getting it right.
- Give children lots of time to do what they are good at. It is tempting to keep them practising what they aren't so good at, and maybe this is necessary, but they also need time to succeed.
- Give them opportunities to learn new skills.
- Provide encouragement to attempt difficult tasks, and respond positively to your child's mistakes. This teaches your child how to handle challenges better next time. For example, 'That's okay, let's work out what to do if it happens again.'
- As children get older give them responsibility for doing things for themselves, for example, work out how to spend pocket money, prepare a meal, shop for themselves (within reason). Be prepared for them not to do it the way you would—and for them to make mistakes.

### Protect your child from adult problems

If you're having troubles with your child's other parent make an effort to keep your child out of what is adults' business. Help your child to see it is not her fault (children often believe it is). She also needs to know that whatever happens somebody will be there for her. You might want to find another caring adult such as a grandparent to support her while you are feeling very stressed.

### Find outside support for your child

Children often do better when life gets difficult if they have some support from people apart from their parents. This person or people could be a grandparent, relative, family friend or teacher. As children get older their own close friends can provide some of this support.

### Get support for yourself

Sometimes things go wrong between parents and children. Parents and babies can have a tough start to life for all sorts of reasons. It is important to try to get things sorted out whatever your child's age. This may mean you need to get support from a professional who has special skills in this area. The effort put in early will pay off in the long run.

### Belong to a spiritual community

This can provide support, friendship, meaning and purpose to life.

### Have family rituals to celebrate events and daily routines

The little special things that you do every day and on special occasions help build a sense of inner security.

The family routines and rituals are powerful organisers of family life that offer stability in times of stress or when families are in trouble.

Special rituals are about how you celebrate special occasions, for example, birthdays, name days, family reunions, Christmas. These can include the day your child was adopted, started school or got a job, or your family became a step-family.

Daily routines can be, for example:

- tucking your child into bed and kissing her goodnight
- how you say goodbye in the morning
- something special that you do when your child gets home from school
- what you do when having a meal together.

## Reminders

- Resilient children are not unaffected by trauma, but they are better able to cope effectively with challenges and overcome adversity.
- Children need to feel loved and lovable—not only when they do things well.
- Children need to feel they have some control in their lives.
- Children need to feel that they can be successful at something.
- Children need a sense of belonging.
- Children need other people, apart from their parents, who care about them and support them.
- Grandparents can be a special support for children and teenagers.
- How parents respond, and how you help children respond to difficult situations, can promote or destroy resilience.

## Contacts

<b>Child and Family Centres</b> (parenting information and support)	9am–5pm Monday–Friday: Gungahlin	6207 0120
	9am–5pm Monday–Friday: Tuggeranong	6207 8228
	9am–5pm Monday–Friday: West Belconnen	6205 2904
<b>Kids Help Line</b>	24-hour	1800 55 1800
<b>Parentline ACT</b>	9am–9pm Monday–Friday, except public hols	6287 3833

## Websites

<a href="http://www.cyh.com">www.cyh.com</a>	Parenting and child health information
<a href="http://www.kidshelp.com.au">www.kidshelp.com.au</a>	Kids helpline
<a href="http://www.parentlink.act.gov.au">www.parentlink.act.gov.au</a>	Other parenting guides, including Self-esteem, Optimism, Families that work well
<a href="http://www.raisingchildren.net.au">www.raisingchildren.net.au</a>	Raising Children Network—covering topics for parenting newborns to teens

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