

Raising Resilient Children

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Resilience is the ability to recover from or adjust easily to changes or misfortunes that we encounter. I recall a fourteen year old that I worked with many years ago who lacked both resilience and adaptability. She was referred to me by her pediatrician after experiencing headaches, stomach aches and other somatic symptoms. She spent over an hour crying hysterically in my office at the tragedy that she was burdened with. She was distraught and depressed knowing that she could not go on a European vacation during the summer for the first time in her life and how she could possibly face her high school classmates when she returned to school in the fall.

Promoting resiliency will assist children in combatting depression and suicidal risk. Suicide is the second leading cause of death among children, adolescents and young adults ages 5 to 24. While a variety of factors can contribute to suicidal risk including exposure to violence and firearms, bullying, parental separation, feelings of hopelessness or acute losses and rejection, clinical depression in children is one of the foremost contributing factors. The incidence of depression in very young children is estimated to be approximately 1 to 2 percent, with the occurrence rising during middle childhood to 4 to 5 percent, and 10 to 17 percent during later adolescence and young adulthood. Other studies have found depression in children to be as high as 25 percent. Depressed children do not behave like depressed adults. They may often be withdrawn but also may be agitated, noncompliant and disruptive. In order to protect children from experiencing depression it becomes important to facilitate resilience and adaptability.

Dr. Martin E.P. Seligman, a renowned psychologist, has focused much of his research and clinical work studying what makes us well instead of what makes us unwell. His guide to facilitating healthy adjustment in children can be found in his book "The Optimistic Child" which provides parents and clinicians an effective approach to encouraging resilience and adaptability and preventing childhood depression. Adaptability is a temperament trait that occurs differentially in children and one which tends to persist over time. Thomas, Chess and Birch and their colleagues have studied different temperament traits in children and have shown that parental discipline needs to vary depending upon the particular temperamental traits that children demonstrate. Not all children are created equally. Some children are adaptable by nature, while others are not very adaptable and adaptability has to be encouraged, nurtured and taught. If you happen to have a child with minimal adaptability, such as my adolescent friend distraught over her loss of a European vacation, there are some things that you can do to encourage resilience and adaptability.

Do Not Overindulge, Just Say No!

We rely on our pediatricians to vaccinate our children against measles, whooping cough, smallpox, polio and a variety of other diseases but only parents can provide their children inoculations against stress. When we overindulge children and never say no, we are not giving them the antibodies that they will need to effectively deal with the stressors of life.

Model Resilience

One of the most powerful methods by which children learn is merely by watching and modeling our own behavior. If children observe parents effectively managing their own adversities, they too will adopt effective coping techniques.

Label Emotions and Teach Methods of Dealing with them Effectively

We rely on our schools to teach our children Pre-Calculus and Global Studies but the labeling and management of emotions is not part of their curriculum. That is a curriculum that parents have to provide. Often, children, especially males, tend to label all emotions as anger. Anger is an emotion that is rooted in unfairness or lack of justice. Missing out on a European vacation results in disappointment, the feeling you get when you do not get your own way. Teach children to correctly identify their emotions and then how best to manage them or get some professional assistance in doing so.

Focus on Things that are Going Well and Why

Our lives are always filled with various adversities but also filled with glorious opportunities and beautiful experiences. Guide children in focusing on the things that may be going well in their lives and how they may have contributed to these.

Promote Healthy Risk Taking and Encourage Problem Solving

Children need to experience risks in order to experience gains to build strength and confidence. Try that new sport, take that acting part in the play, and push yourself into uncomfortable situations. Let children experience the success associated with mastering new challenges. Have them participate in managing their own problems and assisting them with solutions. Do not just jump in and fix things for them.

Promoting resilience and adaptability will provide protection for children against depression and feelings of helplessness.