

Resilience – helping your child to cope with adversity

Along with respect, responsibility and relationships, 'resilience' is one of the four 'R's' at SMC. How do we know if our children are developing the resilience they need to feel settled and OK when things do not go their way, such as an important life skill?

There's probably more than one way to describe what resilience looks like and, of course, no one can be resilient all the time. When a child is coping well we see certain characteristics. For example, we might see him/her using positive self-talk, capably expressing their feelings, not hiding away from strong feelings, using age-appropriate strategies to manage their emotions when upset, rearranging plans to work around an unexpected situation, or using a 'trial and error' approach in their daily life. He/she will also tend to remain hopeful and keep on trying if something doesn't work out the first couple of times, know when to stop trying if they decide the effort is not worthwhile and ask for help if they need it.

The patterns we develop in childhood play a large role in how we deal with stress and problems in the future. Good parental role modelling is integral to demonstrating to your child how to cope with and react to problems. As we know, children take mental pictures of everything they see and play these observations back to you in words and actions. It's vital to express your own feelings positively and constructively. Children learn to manage their feelings by how they see parents/caregivers behaving. Saying, 'I am really upset about what happened at work today' is better than saying, 'My colleague is a [choice word] ...' Overhearing the latter is likely to encourage a child to use the same negative language about someone who is upsetting them. Statements that begin with 'I', followed by an identified feeling are safe and clear expressions of emotions and when children copy this expression they will be understood and more likely empathised with by others. We actively teach the use of 'I' statements from Prep at SMC and encourage students to use an 'I' statement when in a disagreement with peers, prior to asking the teacher for assistance.

Coping with disappointments, hurt and frustrations is a skill needed for life. Sometimes our needs and wants are unable to be fulfilled and when this happens we feel upset and frustrated. Teach your child that feelings are transitory – they come and go, so even bad feelings do pass. For example, students in the Junior School will learn of their new class grouping at the end of the term and may find that some of their friends are not in their class, or the teacher they hoped would be teaching them will be teaching another class. The feeling of disappointment will, perhaps, be expressed. To help with developing resilience, acknowledge and name the feeling (disappointment, upset, let-down) and then find a positive in the situation. For example, 'I can see you are feeling disappointed that ... is not in your class next year, but isn't it great that ... is with you?' or 'I don't think you've ever been in the same class as ... so this will be a good opportunity to get to know her'. Children can be encouraged to learn from experiences of disappointment. They may like hearing about your own difficult experiences as a child, how you managed and what positive things you learnt from them.

On the topic of resilience, KidsMatter refers to the 'International Resilience Project', which reports that for children to overcome adversities, they must draw from three sources of resilience features labeled 'I have', 'I am' and 'I can'. What they draw from each source can be described as follows:

I HAVE

- People around me I trust and who love me, no matter what.
- People around me I trust and who love me, no matter what.
- People who set limits for me so I know when to stop before there is danger or trouble.
- People who show me how to do things right by the way they do things.
- People who want me to learn to do things on my own.
- People who help me when I am sick, in danger or need to learn.

I AM

- A person people can like and love.
- Glad to do nice things for others and show my concern.
- Respectful of myself and others.
- Willing to be responsible for what I do.
- Sure things will be all right.

I CAN

- Talk to others about things that frighten me or bother me.
- Find ways to solve problems that I face.
- Control myself when I feel like doing something not right or dangerous.
- Figure out when it is a good time to talk to someone or to take action.
- Find someone to help me when I need it.

'A resilient child does not need all of these features to be resilient, but one is not enough. A child may be loved (I HAVE), but if he or she has no inner strength (I AM) or social, interpersonal skills (I CAN), there can be no resilience. A child may have a great deal of self-esteem (I AM), but if he or she does not know how to communicate with others or solve problems (I CAN), and has no one to help him or her (I HAVE), the child is not resilient. A child may be very verbal and speak well (I CAN), but if he or she has no empathy (I AM) or does not learn from role models (I HAVE), there is no resilience. Resilience results from a combination of these features.'

(<https://bibalex.org/baifa/Attachment/Documents/115519.pdf>)

The focus on social and emotional skills is really important for children's resilience. These are the skills that help children to understand themselves, to manage a wide range of emotions and to seek help when necessary. Teaching children to accept that all feelings are OK is an important aspect of this and enables them to express things such as frustration or worry.

It is also key to help children feel in charge of their own responses to feelings and to have confidence in their ability to solve problems that arise, with support if necessary. If we understand resilience as partly about being able to seek and accept help when required, we will be able to normalise the range of experiences we all have, including on bad days. To quote KidsMatter, 'Telling children to be brave and resilient may inadvertently teach them that emotions such as sadness, anger and worry should be suppressed in order to meet the approval of adults. We know that the suppression of emotions is detrimental to positive mental health and wellbeing'.

As adults, it is important not to be afraid of these feelings in our children. It is natural to want to protect them from hurt and disappointment by fixing things for them whenever we can, but this does not prepare them for the real world. It is much more useful to teach them to appropriately express and then cope with the difficult feelings they may experience.

Resilience is like other personal attributes; it requires teaching, practice and continued refinement. The byproduct of this developed skill is that your child will be more receptive to the feelings of others when they are faced with difficult challenges. Modelling the desired behaviours and commenting on the effort made by your child will enhance your relationship with him/her while assisting them to navigate and bounce back from tough times and move forward to better times.

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