

# Growing Resilient Children

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As a psychologist concerned with the well-being of children, one of the most exciting current research developments for me is this: Parents can inoculate their children against stress.

Despite the increasing and potentially damaging stressors that are being placed on children today, some children manage to survive and even thrive under high stress conditions. Psychologists call those children: "resilient children".

But parents who raise resilient children by successfully inoculating them against stress don't do it with injections or pills, they do it with a specific set of parenting behaviors. And that's why it is so important for parents to know the key behaviors needed to grow resilient children.

Resilient children bend but don't break. Resilience is the ability to bounce back, the ability to cope with crisis and challenge, the strength to turn the stresses of life into opportunities. Here's what we've found about resilience in children:

Young children at high risk for school failure, as well as for social, behavioral and emotional problems, will instead thrive if key protective factors are present to counteract stressors. Some of these protective factors are personal and some concern the support systems around children - the family, school and community. But study after study has now identified four key characteristics of resilient children. Resilient children are those who first of all develop:

1. Strong feelings of self-esteem and self-efficacy (i.e. a child who can say to himself "I am a good person" and who has a "I can do it" positive attitude - sometimes called "learned optimism").
2. Resilient children also develop systematic problem-solving skills, especially as applied to interpersonal problems (i.e. the ability to look at choices and options and to set realistic goals when faced with a personal problem - liking having to share toys or agreeing about game rules or getting your feelings hurt).
3. Resilient children have the ability to recognize and describe their feelings to an interested adult.
4. Finally they are children with parents who clearly and consistently demonstrate warmth and caring and who take the time and effort to teach their children the positive attitudes and skills which I've already mentioned.

Some people I talk to say 'what's all the fuss about? It's adults who have the stress, kids have it easy'. But let's look at the facts:

- There are 14 times as many divorced Canadians as there were 30 years ago. As a result, 1 child in 5 these days grows up in a family headed by a single parent. Almost an additional 10% of children live either in a reconstituted family or with adults who are not their biological parents.
- Over 70% of families with young children have two working parents who are clearly less available to children than they were in the past.
- 41% of Canadian parents in one study said it was hard to find time and energy for parenting. Increasing numbers of nuclear families (parents and children) are separated by hours or days of travel from their extended family, especially

grandparents, a traditional source of support for both parents and children.

- Today 1 in 5 Canadian children are also living in poverty. That represents an increase of 60% or over half a million more Canadian children living in poverty now than in 1989.

These statistics signal serious stressors in the lives of children. Professionals who work with children know that they are most affected and most stressed by changes in what I call the 3 R's - not reading, writing and 'rithmetic, but the 3 R's of relationships, roles and routines. Marital breakdown, changes in family membership or location, changes in schools and neighborhoods, separation from traditional sources of support, uncertainty with regard to the availability of parents and sometimes with regard to the necessities of life, including food, housing, and physical safety, unpredictable and changing expectations to carry adult responsibilities including caring for younger siblings, refereeing a marital conflict, becoming the primary housekeeper - all these conditions challenge the stability of childhood and present children with the need to keep adjusting to changing relationships, roles and routines. In short - this is a formula for overwhelming stress.

So why should we be concerned about all this? Maybe these things can cause children to feel worried, tense, uncomfortable, angry or scared for a little while, but won't they simply get over it? Maybe the upset will be serious enough to cause a child to lose her appetite or some sleep or have a stomach ache for a short time, but won't she outgrow it? The answer is that some children will cope, even when stress piles-up and becomes chronic. But many other children subjected to high, continuing levels of stress start to experience serious problems. Here are just a few examples:

It's been found that children's adjustment to and achievement in the education system is closely related to a variety of stressors, including mother's mental and physical health, the family's financial situation and a variety of stressful life events. Stress levels in children have been found to be related to respiratory-tract illness, bacterial throat infections and frequency of accidents. Recent studies suggest that levels of stress hormones in infants are directly affected by the quality of physical and emotional interactions between baby and parents. Early experiences of stress can influence patterns of brain development in infants, with profound effect on future brain functioning.

It is important to note that damaging levels of stress in childhood may result not only from dramatic or traumatic life events like divorce, death or disability but also from a prolonged and unrelieved pile-up of minor every-day stressors like conflicts with siblings, being teased or bullied, being pressured around school performance or being too hurried and overprogrammed. Damaging stress is like an alarm bell going off constantly in a child's ears, telling him that there is danger, but never telling him what to do about it, nor giving him a chance to turn off the alarm. The bottom line is that chronic stress in children puts them significantly at risk for behavioral, social, academic and psychosomatic problems which can remain with them into adulthood.

You already know who can do the best job of inoculating children against stress. It's not psychologists, family doctors, nurses or teachers - it's parents. Take the time and effort to practice positive parenting and you will be rewarded with resilient children.

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