

Building childhood resilience



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As we parents look around at so many alarming headlines, it can feel overwhelming when we think of having to guide our adolescents forward to avoid the risks of opiate addiction, the normalization of marijuana use, the pull of the internet, the negative drama of social media and so many other confusing influences. In recent days the subject of fostering resilience in children has become more prominent as a means of combatting these influences, but what does that

mean exactly? And how do we do it?

The Oxford Dictionary defines resilience as “the capacity to recover quickly from difficulties; toughness” and also as it applies to fabric “the ability to spring back into shape”. I like the second definition as well as the first because isn’t that what we want for our teens, the ability to spring back into shape when some adversity lays them low?

A landmark study done by Kaiser Permanente from 1995 to 1997 on over 17,000 participants in Southern CA (replicated in 2010 across 10 states and the District of

Columbia) looked at the impact of “Adverse Childhood Experiences” on health outcomes. Known as the ACEs study, the findings from this work shocked many healthcare providers. Participants were measured for exposure to different childhood experiences as varied as having a parent in jail, the lack of parental supervision, sexual abuse, witnessing domestic violence, food scarcity or a history of family mental illness or addiction. The more Adverse Childhood Experiences a person reported, the higher the likelihood that they would experience serious health consequences in adulthood, real health problems

such as chronic conditions, heart attack or cancer. The more Adverse Childhood Experiences the person reported, the higher the correlation with alcohol or other drug dependence problems too. Part of the significance of this study was to point out the need to build resilience in children. We cannot avoid every adverse experience and children seldom have control over key components of their childhood experience. But as parents we can definitely help our children to build resilience.

In the field of Public Health Prevention, the concept of “protective factors” is central to the best work

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being done. We seek to increase protective factors in order to prevent problems like early substance use from developing. These protective factors match up perfectly with the strategies we can use to build resilience in our youth. One could say that the aim of Public Health Prevention is identical to our goals as responsible parents, to nurture young people and to give them the tools they need so they can spring back into shape when something negative comes along.

Start by recognizing the deep importance of interpersonal connection. Every child needs to be firmly attached to somebody. Social isolation is our enemy. We as parents strive to be our child's first deep connection but do encourage your children to form positive friendships in all ways that you can. Arrange for them to visit friends, and welcome friends to your house. Talk with them about overcoming arguments or disappointments in friendships. Explain why peer pressure is a real thing and how to deal with it. Help them to explore similar values as the basis of friendship. Comfort them if a friendship ends and encourage them to make more connections.

Help them to find the ways of doing this, maybe through a sports team, youth group, church or civic connection, or some specialized group related to music, art, theater, computers, books, or other favored activity.

Crucial to the role of connection is the importance of communication. In order to establish meaningful attachment we must communicate with each other. Talk to them often and listen to them even more. Create opportunities to open a conversation about anything at all. When you are driving them, talk to them. When you are feeding them, talk to them. Steal a minute to sit by them at the end of the day no matter how old they



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are. Ask questions you can bear to hear the answers to; if the answers upset you, don't overreact but ask them their thinking about it. Cue into what they love and talk about that. Let them teach you something. Then thank them for it.

This will show your children that they are able to connect and to communicate and next they are able to make a social contribution in some way. We have opportunities in the Pioneer Valley for our youth to help with so many causes and activities. We just have to point these out to teens.

In some cases we can even go with them to help out and work beside them. This allows young people to contribute to the good of others outside of

themselves, to give back to their school, the community or to a particular cause. This helps them to feel good about themselves at the same time. And be sure to recognize their positive efforts in as many ways as you can. Tell other people what your teen has done, maybe their grandparent or your neighbors? Tell them while your teen is nearby to hear it and receive praise from those other people too. Having an inner knowledge of one's self as a good and worthy person is a big component of building resilience.

Teach your teen how to self-soothe. Ask them what comforts them. Listening to music? A walk in the woods? A funny movie? Drawing? Writing poetry? Getting lost in a

book? A delicious scent like mint or lavender? Soft material like velvet? A quick call or text to a friend? Remind them to take three deep breaths. Show them how to change the environment by walking to a

different place in the house, sitting by a window in the light, going outside the door to feel the air. Offer a back rub. A warm shower. A nap. They will find the strategies that calm them and as they use these things, they will feel a sense of mastery over their inner tensions.

And please remember the importance of modeling positive behavior and positive self-care. They see what you do. Show them that you can calm yourself when you're upset. Show them that you can call a friend back after an argument and make peace. Show them that anger can be a problem-solving tool and not an out-of-control emotion that leads to bad decisions. Don't use language you don't want them to use. Don't take actions you don't want them to take. If you regret something, apologize to them and tell them you realize you should have acted differently.

Respecting yourself teaches them to do the same. Respecting them teaches them that they are worthy of respect and builds resilience. All of these steps repeated over time will help your teen to feel capable and competent. They will become more confident in their own internal toughness and they will be prepared to spring back into shape when life upsets them, without having to resort to artificial means like substances.

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