



# Resilience: Coping Effectively with Life's Challenges

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This article is the first in a three-part series about resilience that is being published in *Interaction*. Coming next: Critical Abilities that Help Develop Resilience.

*Four-year-old Jeremy is despondent when a friend accidentally knocks over his carefully built block tower. He cries out miserably, "You've ruined my whole day!" Jeremy never quite recovers and is easily distressed the rest of the day.*

Families today are exposed to high levels of daily stress, and the incidence of childhood depression is increasing.<sup>1</sup> Despite our best efforts, we cannot prevent adversity and stress. We can, however, help children like Jeremy cope more effectively with life's challenges. Over 30 years of research shows we can *learn* to be more resilient by changing how we *think* about challenges and adversities.<sup>1,2,3</sup>

## What is resilience?

The definition of resilience varies in different cultures and contexts, but generally refers to one's ability to "cope well with adversity" and "persevere and adapt when things go awry."<sup>1</sup>

Resilience helps people deal with stress and adversity, overcome childhood disadvantage, and reach out to new opportunities.<sup>1</sup> Researchers have found that resilient people are healthier, live longer, are more successful in school and work, are happier in relationships and are less prone to depression.<sup>1,4</sup>

## 3 Cs

Studies show that people who manage stress and adversity best have "3 Cs" in common:

**Control:** a belief in their ability to take charge of the controllable aspects of the situation and "influence a more positive outcome."

**Challenge:** a view of mistakes as opportunities for new learning, and change as potential for growth.

**Commitment:** an active engagement in work and other pursuits that gives meaning to their lives. 6, 7

**A resilient view** is characterized by accurate and flexible thinking, and consists of

- creative problem solving
- the capacity to see other points of view and to challenge one's own views the ability to move on with daily life despite obstacles

## What role does our thinking play in being resilient?

Stress, adversity and challenge are inevitable parts of daily life – and sometimes out of our control. However, the way we *think* about stress is very much in our control and makes a substantial difference in how we handle daily bumps in the road.

Some people feel helpless in the face of stress and adversity, so they easily give up attempts to change or improve the situation. Other people hold more resilient views. They see the situation as a challenge that can be overcome if they look for options and keep trying.<sup>4,5</sup> Most importantly, research suggests that resilient thinking patterns can be learned.<sup>1,2,3</sup>

## How can children's resilience be promoted?

Programs to promote resilience in children have existed since the 1970s. These have focused primarily on building self-esteem, increasing school readiness and supporting the parent-child relationship.<sup>4,8,9</sup> Most promotion efforts, however, have tended to overlook the importance of thinking processes in the development of resilience and the handling of stress and adversity.

Resiliency skills that help us think more accurately and flexibly can be absorbed by children from an early age and can optimize the development of resilience.<sup>3,10</sup> It makes good sense, then, to introduce resiliency-building strategies to children as early as possible in order to help them deal with inevitable adversity and inoculate them against depression.



## What role does adult modelling play in children's ability to develop resilient thinking patterns?

Warm, caring adults who role model resilient thinking in the face of daily stresses can nurture children's lifelong capacity for resilience.

In fact, researchers point to just how crucial adult modelling is. Children two and three years old are able to mimic the thinking styles of primary caregivers around them. By eight years of age, most children have already developed a thinking style, or habitual way of responding to stressors.<sup>3</sup>

The following example illustrates how an early childhood educator models a resilient thinking style for the children to mimic:

*When a plan to take the children to the park for a picnic seems threatened by an overnight rainfall and continuing grey skies, Martha considers the big picture. The children are looking forward to the outing, and overcast skies and cooler temperatures may mean fewer crowds from nearby child care centres. The wet grass won't be a problem if the kids wear their rainboots and coats. And if it starts to rain, they can picnic on the benches under the shelter, and finish their outing by going to a nearby library.*

Martha was able to view the situation with realistic optimism. She didn't deny the negative aspects of the weather, but instead found some positive features – less heat and fewer crowds. She put a plan into place and believed she could cope with whatever the weather might bring. And by talking about the plan with the children before the outing, Martha modelled how accurate and flexible thinking can help people look for the controllable aspects in everyday situations.

Just as children develop language in a language-rich environment, so they will develop the skills of resilience in a resilience-rich environment. Research provides the direction and tools for us to create that environment. Let's put ourselves and the children we work with on the path to a resilient future!

*This article is adapted from the Reaching IN...Reaching OUT Resiliency Guidebook. For more information about developing resilient thinking and coping styles, please visit [www.reachinginreachingout.com](http://www.reachinginreachingout.com) and click on "Guidebook & Videos."*

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