

Resilience:

Parent Information Handout



We're very excited to share some general information about resilience with you and to tell you a little bit about a resiliency training program that is working with early childhood educators in several child care centers in Canada.

Resilience—What is it?

When things get tough, some people continue to “swim along” while others “nearly sink.” People who are able to “swim” through difficult times are more resilient. They “bounce back” from stressful experiences.

Resilience—Why is it important?

Research has found that people who are able to bounce back live longer, have better health and happier relationships. They are also more successful in school and jobs. Some good news: research also tells us that some of the important skills that help people to bounce back can be learned by anyone. And children learn these skills by watching the adults around them.

Resilience—What is resiliency skills training?

Dr. Martin Seligman, a social psychologist, and his colleagues at the University of Pennsylvania have studied the development of resilience for many years. They created a program called the Penn Resilience Program (PRP) that teaches resiliency skills to adults and children between the ages of eight and twelve. The positive results of this program, which are supported by research, have led to its being known and used around the world.

Dr. Andrew Shatté, one of the team members of the Penn Resilience Program, came to Toronto as part of Reaching IN ...Reaching OUT, a Canadian resiliency-promotion project. He taught the resiliency skill set to teachers at four Ontario child care centers. These are the same skills that are written about in detail in the book Dr. Shatté co-authored with Karen Reivich, *The Resilience Factor* (see the Resource list on page 39 for complete information).

Seven Abilities Associated with Resilience—What they mean for you and your child

Researchers from the University of Pennsylvania have found *seven abilities* associated with resilience. As we go through the seven abilities, we include suggestions made by these researchers to assist parents of young children help themselves and their children bounce back from daily stresses and tough times.

Ability 1. Being in charge of our emotions

Psychologists call this *emotional regulation*. Being in charge of our emotions is about being able to stay calm under pressure. When we get mad or upset, our emotions can be overwhelming and can affect our whole day. When we're in charge of our emotions, we can calm down and clear our heads enough so that we don't stay overwhelmed. This doesn't mean we cut off negative emotions or that we keep our emotions inside: expressing emotions, both negative and positive, is healthy and constructive. Being in



charge of our emotions is about calming down enough so that we express our emotions in ways that will help the situation.

We can see the beginning stages of emotional regulation in babies when they suck their fingers or hold on to their blankets to soothe themselves. Young children need our support to calm down. We can do this by letting them know that all their feelings are acceptable, but that not all their behaviors are. We need to set firm and loving limits on their behavior. For example, we can say, “It’s okay to be mad, but it’s not okay to hurt yourself or somebody else.” Then we can give them other choices to express their emotions safely and to calm down. For example, they could draw their “mad” feelings on paper.

One simple and effective way to help children (and parents) be in charge of emotions is the old tried and true method—three deep breaths. When we slowly breathe in to the count of three, then breathe out to the count of five, and do this a few times in a row, we experience an amazing calming effect. Small children can be asked to imagine blowing up a balloon, filling their bellies with air, and then blowing out into the balloon.

Dr. Shatté says that emotional regulation is the most important ability associated with resilience. When we can be in charge of our emotions, it affects the way we interact with others, the way we solve problems, even the way we look at the world.

Ability 2. Controlling our impulses

Impulse control is the ability to stop, and choose whether to act on the desire to take action. For example, when we become angry, we may want to shout and get into an argument. Impulse control helps us to stop ourselves and to decide that these actions may not do any good in the situation—in fact, they could make matters worse. Controlling our impulses helps us to finish what we set out to do and to plan for the future.

Impulse control is also the ability to delay gratification—to control our impulse to have something right now just because we want it.

The “Marshmallow Experiment,” an interesting experiment about delaying gratification, was done in the 1960s by researchers at a preschool on the Stanford University Campus. The researchers invited four-year-old children into a room and told them, “You can have this marshmallow right now, but if you wait for a few minutes while I run an errand, you can have two marshmallows when I come back.” When a follow-up study was done fourteen years later, the researchers found that the four-year-olds who were able to wait and not eat the marshmallow right away were coping better with life and doing better in school and in relationships in adolescence.

We can help young children develop impulse control, by modeling it ourselves and acknowledging their achievement when they control their impulses. For example, we can say, “Way to go! It was really hard to wait, but you did it!”



Impulse control and emotional regulation are closely related. Both are very important to resiliency development. Once we have these two resiliency abilities under our belt, the other abilities follow more easily.

Ability 3. Analyzing the cause of problems

This is the ability to analyze problems and accurately decide what the cause of the problem is. The word *accurately* is very important. Researchers at the Penn Resilience Program have shown that what we *think* about stressful events or problems affects how we *feel* about these events and what we do about them.

Most people have developed thinking habits that become patterns called “thinking styles.” Some thinking styles get in the way of people’s ability to look at the problem accurately, to find a solution, and to bounce back. For example, some people *blame themselves* when things go wrong; this is called a “Me” thinking style. Other people have a habit of *blaming others* when things go wrong. This is called a “Not me” thinking style.

If we use our thinking style habits to analyze a problem, we may not be accurate about the cause of the problem. Resilient thinking allows us to be *flexible*—to see that some problems are the result of ourselves and our actions, while others are not. Deciding what is *accurate* in a particular situation helps us come up with a solution that will be helpful.

We can help children develop skills in this area by first helping them to *identify* the problem and then by thinking together about what they can do about it. For example, we can say, “There is a problem here because you both want to play with the same toy. What do you think you could do?” or “What do you think we could do?”

Ability 4. Maintaining realistic optimism

This is the ability to maintain hope for a bright future. This kind of optimism is not about seeing only the positive things in life and turning a blind eye to negative events. It’s about *seeing things as they are* and believing that we can make the best out of the situation.

This ability is related to another common thinking habit: our thoughts about *how long* an adversity or stress will last, which researchers call “Always/Not always” thinking. Some people have the habit of feeling as if all stresses were permanent. For example, parents of a new baby might say, “I’ll never be rested again.” This is characteristic of “Always” thinking and it can make the situation feel overwhelming and hopeless because it feels so *permanent*. People who see the situation as temporary or as “Not always” might say, “I feel exhausted now, but when the baby sleeps through the night, I’ll get more rest.” Seeing that the situation won’t always be this way helps us to feel less overwhelmed. Resilient thinking allows us to be *flexible*—to see that some stressful situations are permanent, but many are temporary.

If a situation actually is permanent, accurate and flexible thinking can help us to find solutions to ease the stress. The control we feel with accurate and flexible thinking helps to maintain a sense of optimism for the future.



We can help children become more accurate and flexible in thinking about whether a situation is permanent or temporary. “Always” thinking like “I never get to...” can be changed into “not always” thinking with a gentle reminder: “Remember, on Saturday you and Jonah played with the train set all morning.” And you can challenge “I will never be able to do...” thinking by reminding your child of past achievements: “Remember, you thought you would never be able to swim without my help and now you can swim all by yourself!”

Ability 5. Having empathy for others

Empathy is often described as understanding what it is like to walk in another person’s shoes. It’s the ability to understand the feelings and needs of another person.

Children learn to understand and support others’ feelings by being understood and supported by those around them. Young children benefit when an adult helps them recognize their own feelings first: “You look happy about doing that all by yourself.” Later on, adults can help them recognize others’ feelings: “Jenny’s face looks sad—I wonder if she misses playing with her friend today?” Research shows that being understood and understanding others are important to the growth of resilience.

Ability 6. Believing in your own competence

This ability relates to the belief that we have what it takes to tackle most of the problems we face and bounce back when things get tough. It is the feeling of being effective in the world, making a difference, having an impact, and knowing that what we do matters. Belief in our own competence encourages us to keep on trying, even when situations are challenging and influences our ability to maintain hope for a realistically optimistic future.

We can help children experience competence by giving them choices that allow them to influence decisions that affect them, for example: “Do you want to watch TV or play with your trucks while I cook dinner?” Offering choice helps children feel they have some control over what they do. Giving them opportunities to succeed, but still feel challenged, increases confidence.

Ability 7. Reaching Out

This is the ability to take on the new opportunities that life presents. Resiliency research says that people who see mistakes as a learning opportunity find it easier to take risks and try new things.

We can help children want to try new things by pointing out that “no one is perfect” and that “everyone makes mistakes. It’s part of how we learn new things.” We can also remind children of what they have already accomplished, so that they can see they are indeed growing and learning every day: “When you were a baby could you walk? And look at you now! You run so fast I can hardly keep up with you!”

Another important part of *reaching out* is being accurate and realistic about how much we can cope with and being willing to ask for help when we need it. We can find sup-



port from friends, co-workers, community organizations, and professionals. We can help children reach out for support by modeling that it is okay to ask for help—that we all need support from others sometimes.

One More Thinking Habit

We've looked at seven abilities associated with resilience and talked a bit about "Me/Not Me" and "Always/Not always" thinking habits.

One other common thinking habit is important to mention here. It's called "Everything /Not everything" thinking. This describes *how much* of our life we believe will be affected by the cause of a problem or stress we are facing. For example, if you miss a doctor's appointment, you could explain the cause of the missed appointment as "I can't do anything right!" This would be an "Everything" explanation and if it were true, it would affect many areas of your life, including your relationship with family and friends. However, if you explain the cause of the missed appointment as, "I forgot to mark the appointment on my kitchen calendar," you're probably being more accurate and using "Not everything" thinking. The reason for the missed appointment was very specific and only affected this particular situation. It doesn't have to affect the way you relate to family and friends or even other appointments you have. It's easier to bounce back when you see a situation as very specific, because it feels less overwhelming and you can do something about it.

We can help children develop "Not everything" thinking by challenging their assumptions that their weakness in one area eliminates their strength in another. A child who says, "I can't do anything right," (a perfect example of "Everything" thinking) should be reminded "You may find skating difficult right now, but you are a terrific runner."

Summary

When we are resilient, we can bounce back when the going gets tough. And the skills of bouncing back can be learned! Learning these skills can have a positive impact on seven areas researchers have found to be most related to resilience.

Remember, we can challenge our own thinking habits to make sure that they are accurate about stressful events. We can ask ourselves, "Is the stress really going to last *forever*?" "Is the stress really going to affect *everything* in our life?" We can also try to be accurate about who is responsible for situations. Most stressful situations are not 100% the result of just one person's failings or actions. While some problems may be due to you and your actions, others may not.

Children imitate the thinking habits of adults around them. When parents model resilient thinking, they are going a long way toward promoting resilience in their children.

For more information about resilience, please check the **Reaching IN ... Reaching Out** website: www.reachinginreachingout.com