

Resilience

10 Tips For Raising Resilient Kids
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While adulthood is filled with serious responsibilities, childhood isn't exactly stress-free. Kids take tests, learn new information, change schools, change neighborhoods, get sick, get braces, encounter bullies, make new friends and occasionally get hurt by those friends.

What helps kids in navigating these kinds of challenges is resilience. Resilient kids are problem solvers. They face unfamiliar or tough situations and strive to find good solutions.

"When they step into a situation, [resilient kids] they have a sense they can figure out what they need to do and can handle what is thrown at them with a sense of confidence," said Lynn Lyons, LICSW, a psychotherapist who specializes in treating anxious families and co-author of the book *Anxious Kids, Anxious Parents: 7 Ways to Stop the Worry Cycle and Raise Courageous and Independent Children with anxiety* expert Reid Wilson, Ph.D.

This doesn't mean that kids have to do everything on their own, she said. Rather, they know how to ask for help and are able to problem-solve their next steps.

Resilience isn't birthright. It can be taught. Lyons encouraged parents to equip their kids with the skills to handle the unexpected, which actually contrasts our cultural approach.

"We have become a culture of trying to make sure our kids are comfortable. We as parents are trying to stay one step ahead of everything our kids are going to run into." The problem? "Life doesn't work that way."

Anxious people have an especially hard time helping their kids tolerate uncertainty, simply because they have a hard time tolerating it themselves. "The idea of putting your child through the same pain that you went through is intolerable," Lyons said. So anxious parents try to protect their kids and shield them from worst-case scenarios.

However, a parent's job isn't to be there all the time for their kids, she said. It's to teach them to handle uncertainty and to problem-solve. Below, Lyons shared her valuable suggestions for raising resilient kids.

1. Don't accommodate every need.

According to Lyons, "whenever we try to provide certainty and comfort, we are getting in the way of children being able to develop their own problem-solving and mastery." (Overprotecting kids only fuels their anxiety.)

She gave a “dramatic but not uncommon example.” A child gets out of school at 3:15. But they worry about their parent picking them up on time. So the parent arrives an hour earlier and parks by their child’s classroom so they can see the parent is there.

In another example, parents let their 7-year-old sleep on a mattress on the floor in their bedroom because they’re too uncomfortable to sleep in their own room.

2. Avoid eliminating all risk.

Naturally, parents want to keep their kids safe. But eliminating all risk robs kids of learning resiliency. In one family Lyons knows, the kids aren’t allowed to eat when the parents are not home, because there’s a risk they might choke on their food. (If the kids are old enough to stay home alone, they’re old enough to eat, she said.)

The key is to allow appropriate risks and teach your kids essential skills. “Start young. The child who’s going to get his driver’s license is going to have started when he’s 5 [years old] learning how to ride his bike and look both ways [slow down and pay attention].”

Giving kids age-appropriate freedom helps them learn their own limits, she said.

3. Teach them to problem-solve.

Let’s say your child wants to go to sleep-away camp, but they’re nervous about being away from home. An anxious parent, Lyons said, might say, “Well, then there’s no reason for you to go.”

But a better approach is to normalize your child’s nervousness, and help them figure out how to navigate being homesick. So you might ask your child how they can practice getting used to being away from home.

When Lyons’s son was anxious about his first final exam, they brainstormed strategies, including how he’d manage his time and schedule in order to study for the exam.

In other words, engage your child in figuring out how they can handle challenges. Give them the opportunity, over and over, “to figure out what works and what doesn’t.”

4. Teach your kids concrete skills.

When Lyons works with kids, she focuses on the specific skills they’ll need to learn in order to handle certain situations. She asks herself, “Where are we going with this [situation]? What skill do they need to get there?” For instance, she might teach a shy child how to greet someone and start a conversation.

5. Avoid “why” questions.

“Why” questions aren’t helpful in promoting problem-solving. If your child left their bike in the rain, and you ask “why?” “what will they say? I was careless. I’m an 8-year-old,” Lyons said.

Ask “how” questions instead. “You left your bike out in the rain, and your chain rusted. How will you fix that?” For instance, they might go online to see how to fix the chain or contribute money to a new chain, she said.

Lyons uses “how” questions to teach her clients different skills. “How do you get yourself out of bed when it’s warm and cozy? How do you handle the noisy boys on the bus that bug you?”

6. Don’t provide all the answers.

Rather than providing your kids with every answer, start using the phrase “I don’t know,” “followed by promoting problem-solving,” Lyons said. Using this phrase helps kids learn to tolerate uncertainty and think about ways to deal with potential challenges.

Also, starting with small situations when they’re young helps prepare kids to handle bigger trials. They won’t like it, but they’ll get used to it, she said.

For instance, if your child asks if they’re getting a shot at the doctor’s office, instead of placating them, say, “I don’t know. You might be due for a shot. Let’s figure out how you’re going to get through it.”

Similarly, if your child asks, “Am I going to get sick today?” instead of saying, “No, you won’t,” respond with, “You might, so how might you handle that?”

If your child worries they’ll hate their college, instead of saying, “You’ll love it,” you might explain that some freshmen don’t like their school, and help them figure out what to do if they feel the same way, she said.

7. Avoid talking in catastrophic terms.

Pay attention to what you say to your kids and around them. Anxious parents, in particular, tend to “talk very catastrophically around their children,” Lyons said. For instance, instead of saying “It’s really important for you to learn how to swim,” they say, “It’s really important for you to learn how to swim because it’d be devastating to me if you drowned.”

8. Let your kids make mistakes.

“Failure is not the end of the world. [It’s the] place you get to when you figure out what to do next,” Lyons said. Letting kids mess up is tough and painful for parents. But it helps kids learn how to fix slip-ups and make better decisions next time.

According to Lyons, if a child has an assignment, anxious or overprotective parents typically want to make sure the project is perfect, even if their child has no interest in doing it in the first place. But let your kids see the consequences of their actions.

Similarly, if your child doesn’t want to go to football practice, let them stay home, Lyons said. Next time they’ll sit on the bench and probably feel uncomfortable.

9. Help them manage their emotions.

Emotional management is key in resilience. Teach your kids that all emotions are OK, Lyons said. It’s OK to feel angry that you lost the game or someone else finished your ice cream. Also, teach them that after feeling their feelings, they need to think through what they’re doing next, she said.

“Kids learn very quickly which powerful emotions get them what they want. Parents have to learn how to ride the emotions, too.” You might tell your child, “I understand that you feel that way. I’d feel the same way if I were in your shoes, but now you have to figure out what the appropriate next step is.”

If your child throws a tantrum, she said, be clear about what behavior is appropriate (and inappropriate). You might say, “I’m sorry we’re not going to get ice cream, but this behavior is unacceptable.”

10. Model resiliency.

Of course, kids also learn from observing their parents’ behavior. Try to be calm and consistent, Lyons said. “You cannot say to a child you want them to control their emotions, while you yourself are flipping out.”

“Parenting takes a lot of practice and we all screw up.” When you do make a mistake, admit it. “I really screwed up. I’m sorry I handled that poorly. Let’s talk about a different way to handle that in the future,” Lyons said.

Resiliency helps kids navigate the inevitable trials, triumphs and tribulations of childhood and adolescence. Resilient kids also become resilient adults, able to survive and thrive in the face of life’s unavoidable stressors.