Defeat or Determination: Families Are Key to Child Resiliency
By Beth Boyle, Ed.D.

Adversity--it’s inevitable. We all face challenges throughout our lives--some big, some small--but we particularly worry about the impact on our children and their ability to manage hardships and setbacks. Even with our best efforts, we cannot shelter our children from all the painful parts of life, nor should we.

So, how do we help our children when all we want to do is protect them? Here’s the good news--we can help our children build resiliency skills. We can raise children who experience challenges as obstacles, rather than as defeats. In doing so, we are providing them with some protection against the potentially debilitating effects of adversity.

Now here’s the tricky part--we have to embrace the strategies and put them to use ourselves. “Do as I say, not as I do” does not apply here.

It Starts with You

Research shows that your positive, supportive relationship with your child is so important to building your child’s resilience. The first step is self-care so that we have the capacity to be available to others.

There is that analogy about putting your oxygen mask first, but as we’re talking about building the ability to cope with stress, bringing up a scenario where you’re planning for a plane crash seems like a lot to start with. I prefer, “Take care of yourself first. You can’t pour from an empty cup.” Think through what self-care strategies reduce your stress. If you’re healthy, you can help your child avoid unhealthy stress reactions and bounce back from stressors.

Listed below are other resiliency strategies to practice and to model for your child.

• Reflection is a critical strategy and actually should be built in across the other strategies. Consider how you would check in with yourself regarding self-care. What are your stress signals? Where do you feel it in your body? How does your behavior change? What do I need? What self-care options have worked for me in the past? What can I learn from this situation? What’s under my control? How have I handled stressful situations in the past? You can be an example of reflecting on emotions and how you respond to them – being mindful about your ability to model having tough emotions and coping with them.

• Develop your mindset about life’s hardships. With a growth mindset, you might look for the positives or consider what you will learn from a situation. Examine what you tell yourself when faced with adversity. Is it a message of hopelessness or problem-solving?

• Consider thinking flexibly when life throws something at you. This allows you to consider other possibilities when viewing your circumstances, rather than seeing a situation as all bad or all good. For example, if you think you only have one option and it doesn’t work out, you may view your situation as hopeless. Using flexible thinking allows you to keep your options open or recognize a situation is temporary.

• You can be flawed! You can make your own mistakes and still build your child’s resiliency. Model how you try to learn from every challenge, how it’s important to pick yourself back up, and face your challenges.

• In addition to your family relationships, have relationships and supports outside your family.

• Be a safe space for your child. Your child will need a space to fall apart sometimes, to fail and regroup.
Building and maintaining resiliency skills is a lifelong practice, so ease into these strategies. As you review them, consider what would fit into your daily life with your child—the routines, the conversations—and begin to add and experiment with them.

The idea is, over time, to provide your child with the opportunities and guidance to develop the personalized toolkit necessary for recovery and growth from adversity.

- Practice using problem-solving skills. This can be done during play as well by discussing hypothetical situations and real-life challenges. The idea is to brainstorm solutions and plan for how to respond to these challenges.

- Encourage your child to set goals. Working toward goals, even when it’s challenging, allows children to experience how they handle successes and obstacles. You can reflect with them about what they learned from both types of experiences and celebrate their efforts. What, if anything, do you want to change with your goals? What supports will help you make it to the next goal or step? What are you capable of and how can I, as your parent/caregiver, help you?

- Help your child learn to recognize what is under their control. It can be very empowering to learn that their reactions, attitude, and the choices they make are under their control.

- Build opportunities to practice social-emotional skills such as emotion recognition (being able to recognize their emotions and how their bodies experience them) and self-regulation (strategies for managing emotions and impulses). This can include practicing and reflecting on the use of coping skills (identifying ideas, selecting best fit, planning for how and when to use them, reviewing how they worked when used, and refining plan as needed).

- Encourage the practicing of gratitude and finding joy where they can.

- Nurture your child’s self-compassion. This involves self-care and self-talk. What is your child’s inner monologue during tough situations and how would they like to change it?

**Resiliency Resources**

To learn more about raising resilient children, please consider the following resources:

**Infants and Toddlers**
https://centerforresilientchildren.org/infants/for-parents/

**Preschoolers**
https://centerforresilientchildren.org/preschool/for-parents/

**All ages and teens**
https://www.apa.org/topics/parenting/resilience-tip-tool
https://www.apa.org/topics/bounce-resilience-teens
https://www.apa.org/topics/resilience/guide-parents-teachers
https://www.canr.msu.edu/news/
building_strong_children_promoting_resilience_to_help_childrenbounce_back

**Information on Resiliency Video**
https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/inbrief-resilience-series/

**Resiliency Related to Race and Ethnicity**
https://www.apa.org/res

**Parent/Caregiver Resiliency**
https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/are-you-aware/202012/six-easy-steps-boosting-your-resilience

About the author: Dr. Beth Boyle is an Assistant Research Scientist at the IDEALS Institute (and a parent of three daughters). She has been a behavior specialist and the director of a specialized child care center serving children of parents in drug recovery. Her research interests include family engagement, reducing implicit bias in early childhood education, and risks factors impacting child development.