

# Building Resilience in Your Child - Tips For Parents

## The 7 Cs: The Essential Building Blocks of Resilience

**Bottom Line #1:** *Young people live up or down to expectations we set for them. They need adults who believe in them unconditionally and hold them to the high expectations of being compassionate, generous, and creative.*

**Competence:** When we notice what young people are doing right and give them opportunities to develop important skills, they feel competent. We undermine competence when we don't allow young people to recover themselves after a fall.

**Confidence:** Young people need confidence to be able to navigate the world, think outside the box, and recover from challenges.

**Connection:** Connections with other people, schools, and communities offer young people the security that allows them to stand on their own and develop creative solutions.

**Character:** Young people need a clear sense of right and wrong and a commitment to integrity.

**Contribution:** Young people who contribute to the well-being of others will receive gratitude rather than condemnation. They will learn that contributing feels good, and may therefore more easily turn to others, and do so without shame.

**Coping:** Young people who possess a variety of healthy coping strategies will be less likely to turn to dangerous quick-fixes when stressed.

**Control:** Young people who understand privileges and respect are earned through demonstrated responsibility will learn to make wise choices and feel a sense of control.

**Bottom Line #2:**

*What we do to model healthy resilience strategies for our children is more important than anything we say about them.*

## Competence

Competence is the ability or know-how to handle situations effectively. It's not a vague feeling or hunch that "I can do this." Competence is acquired through actual experience. Children can't become competent

without first developing a set of skills that allows them to trust their judgments, make responsible choices, and face difficult situations.

**In thinking about your child's competence and how to fortify it, ask yourself:**

- Do I help my child focus on his strengths and build on them?
- Do I notice what he does well or do I focus on his mistakes?
- When I need to point out a mistake, am I clear and focused or do I communicate that I believe he always messes up?
- Do I help him recognize what he has going for himself?
- Am I helping him build the educational, social, and stress-reduction skills necessary to make him competent in the real world?
- Do I communicate in a way that empowers my child to make his own decisions or do I undermine his sense of competence by giving him information in ways he can't grasp? In other words, do I lecture him or do I facilitate his thinking?
- Do I let him make safe mistakes so he has the opportunity to right himself or do I try to protect him from every trip and fall?
- As I try to protect him, does my interference mistakenly send the message, "I don't think you can handle this?"
- If I have more than one child, do I recognize the competencies of each without comparison to siblings?

## Confidence

True confidence, the solid belief in one's own abilities, is rooted in competence. Children gain confidence by demonstrating their competence in real situations. Confidence is not warm-and-fuzzy self-esteem that supposedly results from telling kids they're special or precious. Children who experience their own competence and know they are safe and protected develop a deep-seated security that promotes the confidence to face and cope with challenges. When parents support children in finding their own islands of competence and building on them, they prepare kids to gain enough confidence to try new ventures and trust their abilities to make sound choices.

***In thinking about your child's degree of confidence, consider the following questions:***

- Do I see the best in my child so that he can see the best in himself?
- Do I clearly express that I expect the best qualities (not achievements, but personal qualities such as fairness, integrity, persistence, and kindness) in him?
- Do I help him recognize what he has done right or well?
- Do I treat him as an incapable child or as a youngster who is learning to navigate his world?
- Do I praise him often enough? Do I praise him honestly about specific achievements or do I give such diffuse praise that it doesn't seem authentic? (More information about praising effectively is in Chapter 6.)
- Do I catch him being good when he is generous, helpful, and kind or when he does something without being asked or cajoled?
- Do I encourage him to strive just a little bit farther because I believe he can succeed?
- Do I hold realistically high expectations?

- Do I unintentionally push him to take on more than he can realistically handle, causing him to stumble and lose confidence?
- When I need to criticize or correct him, do I focus only on what he's doing wrong or do I remind him that he is capable of doing well?
- Do I avoid instilling shame in my child?

## Connection

Children with close ties to family, friends, school, and community are more likely to have a solid sense of security that produces strong values and prevents them from seeking destructive alternatives. Family is the central force in any child's life, but connections to civic, educational, religious, and athletic groups can also increase a young person's sense of belonging to a wider world and being safe within it.

***Some questions to ponder when considering how connected your child is to family and the broader world include:***

- Do we build a sense of physical safety and emotional security within our home?
- Does my child know that I am absolutely crazy in love with him?
- Do I understand that the challenges my child will put me through on his path towards independence are normal developmental phases or will I take them so personally that our relationship will be harmed?
- Do I allow my child to have and express all types of emotions or do I suppress unpleasant feelings?
- Is he learning that going to other people for emotional support during difficult times is productive or shameful?
- Do we do everything to address conflict within our family and work to resolve problems rather than let them fester?
- Do we have a television and entertainment center in almost every room or do we create a common space where our family shares time together?
- Do I encourage my child to take pride in the various ethnic, religious, or cultural groups to which we belong?
- Do I jealously guard my child from developing close relationships with others or do I foster healthy relationships that I know will reinforce my positive messages?
- Do I protect my friends' and neighbors' children, just as I hope they will protect mine?

## Character

Children need a fundamental sense of right and wrong to ensure they are prepared to make wise choices, contribute to the world, and become stable adults. Children with character enjoy a strong sense of self-worth and confidence. They are more comfortable sticking to their own values and demonstrating a caring attitude toward others.

***Some basic questions to ask yourself include:***

- Do I help my child understand how his behaviors affect other people in good and bad ways?
- Am I helping my child recognize himself as a caring person?
- Do I allow him to clarify his own values?
- Do I allow him to consider right versus wrong and look beyond immediate satisfaction or selfish needs?
- Do I value him so clearly that I model the importance of caring for others?
- Do I demonstrate the importance of community?

- Do I help him develop a sense of spirituality?
- Am I careful to avoid racist, ethnic, or hateful statements or stereotypes? Am I clear how I regard these thoughts and statements whenever and wherever my child is exposed to them?
- Do I express how I think of others' needs when I make decisions or take actions?

## Contribution

It is a powerful lesson when children realize that the world is a better place *because they are in it*. Children who understand the importance of personal contribution gain a sense of purpose that can motivate them. They will not only take actions and make choices that improve the world, but they will also enhance their own competence, character, and sense of connection. Teens who contribute to their communities will be surrounded by reinforcing thank yous instead of the low expectations and condemnation so many teens endure.

***Before we can foster this sense of contribution, here are some things to consider:***

- Do I communicate to my child (at appropriate age levels, of course) that many people in the world do not have as much human contact, money, freedom, and security as they need?
- Do I teach the important value of serving others?
- Do I model generosity with my time and money?
- Do I make clear to my child that I believe he can improve the world?
- Do I create opportunities for each child to contribute in some specific way?
- Do I search my child's circle for other adults who might serve as role models who contribute to their communities and the world? Do I use these adults as examples to encourage my child to be the best he can be?

## Coping

Children who learn to cope effectively with stress are better prepared to overcome life's challenges. The best protection against unsafe, worrisome behaviors may be a wide repertoire of positive, adaptive coping strategies.

***Before we begin teaching children this repertoire of coping and stress-reduction skills, here are some basic questions to ask ourselves:***

- Do I help him understand the difference between a real crisis and something that just feels like an emergency?
- Do I model positive coping strategies on a consistent basis?
- Do I allow my child enough time to use imaginative play? Do I recognize that fantasy and play are childhood's tools to solve problems?
- Do I guide my child to develop positive, effective coping strategies?
- Do I believe that telling him to "just stop" the negative behaviors will do any good?
- Do I recognize that for many young people, risk behaviors are attempts to alleviate their stress and pain?
- If my child participates in negative behaviors, do I condemn him for it? Do I recognize that I may only increase his sense of shame and therefore drive him toward more negativity?
- Do I model problem-solving step by step or do I just react emotionally when I'm overwhelmed?
- Do I model the response that sometimes the best thing to do is conserve energy and let go of the belief that I can tackle all problems?
- Do I model the importance of caring for our bodies through exercise, good nutrition, and adequate sleep? Do I model relaxation techniques?

- Do I encourage creative expression?
- As I struggle to compose myself so I can make fair, wise decisions under pressure, do I model how I take control rather than respond impulsively or rashly to stressful situations?
- Do I create a family environment in which talking, listening, and sharing is safe, comfortable, and productive?

## Control

When children realize that *they* can control the outcomes of their decisions and actions, they're more likely to know that they have the ability to do what it takes to bounce back. On the other hand, if parents make all the decisions, children are denied opportunities to learn control. A child who feels "everything always happens to me" tends to become passive, pessimistic, or even depressed. He sees control as external—whatever he does really doesn't matter because he has no control of the outcome. But a resilient child knows that he has internal control. By his choices and actions, he determines the results. He knows that he can make a difference, which further promotes his competence and confidence.

### ***Some questions about control:***

- Do I help my child understand that life's events are not purely random and most things happen as a direct result of someone's actions and choices?
- On the other hand, do I help my child understand that he isn't responsible for many of the bad circumstances in his life (such as parents' separation or divorce)?
- Do I help him think about the future, but take it one step at a time?
- Do I help him recognize even his small successes so he can experience the knowledge that he can succeed?
- Do I help him understand that no one can control all circumstances, but everyone can shift the odds by choosing positive or protective behaviors?
- Do I understand that discipline is about teaching, not punishing or controlling? Do I use discipline as a means to help my child understand that his actions produce certain consequences?
- Do I reward demonstrated responsibility with increased privileges?

[The 7 Cs are an adaptation from The Positive Youth Development movement. Rick Little and colleagues at The International Youth Foundation first described the 4 Cs of confidence, competence, connection, and character as the key ingredients needed to ensure a healthy developmental path. They later added contribution because youth with these essential 4 characteristics also contributed to society. The additional two C's – coping and control – allow the model to both promote healthy development and prevent risk.]

Reproduced with kind permission of:

**Kenneth Ginsburg, M.D., M.S. EdDr.** Ginsburg is a pediatrician specializing in Adolescent Medicine at The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia and an Associate Professor of Pediatrics at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine, and Co-Founder and Director of Programs at [Center for Parent and Teen Communication](#)

Special thanks to Juanona Brewster, MDiv, MTS, MJ, of [JoinInAction@gmail.com](mailto:JoinInAction@gmail.com) for liaison assistance.

