

## BETTER • KID • CARE

## Becoming Resilient: Ideas to Build On

***“The best documented asset of resilience is a strong bond to a competent and caring adult, which need not be a parent. For children who do not have such an adult involved in their life, it is the first order of business...”*** (Masten & Reed, 2002)

**Resilience**, as defined by The American Psychological Association, is “the ability to adapt well to adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or even significant sources of stress (APA 2011).” Resiliency helps us to ‘bounce back’ from adverse circumstances - something every human being needs. As professional caregivers, it is important to gain an understanding of resiliency and discover what we can do to help children build resiliency.

**Resilience is not a trait that a youth is born with or automatically keeps once it is achieved. Resilience is a complex interactive process.**

(Zimmerman & Arunkumar 1994).

Keep in mind that no one person or child is always resilient. Resiliency is described as fluid over time, requiring that we support resiliency throughout overall development, with particular focus during a stressful, sensitive, or challenging developmental stage. “Resilience is not a universal construct that applies to all life domains. Children may be resilient to specific risk factors, but quite vulnerable to others.” (Zimmerman & Arunkumar 1994)

Children know when their sense of security and normalcy are shifted, such as when facing separation, loss, economic difficulties, volatile home lives, unpredictable routines, or even when overwhelmed by stimuli connected to the increase of digital media. Richard Davidson, founder of the Laboratory for Affective Neuroscience at the University of Wisconsin, states, “The neural circuitry that allows us to pay attention, calm ourselves, and attune to others’ feelings all takes shape in the first two decades of life. And yet kids today face a range of social conditions – primarily stress caused by school and peer pressures, unstable home lives, and hectic schedules – that foil the healthy development of this circuitry.”



### **Becoming Resilient**

According to Robert Brooks, author of *Raising Resilient Children*, “Each interaction with our children provides an educational opportunity to help them weave a strong and resilient personal fabric.” As professional caregivers, we can help children negotiate the difficult times and teach problem solving skills that help children work through varying adversities – we can help children become resilient:

- *Reflect on your important role.* Research tells us that the strongest predictor of children’s resiliency is a consistent, caring, competent adult. You are the role model, guiding healthy relationships and teaching social skills. Strive to provide safe and emotionally supportive environments for children. Most importantly, children need to feel your genuine care and concern and know they can count on you.
- *Help children explore failures and challenges as opportunities to express themselves, solve problems, and learn something new.* Challenges and failures, although hard, are perfect teaching opportunities. Instead of jumping in and fixing the problem, bring

(over)

children's ideas into the problem solving. "This didn't work and I bet that made you feel frustrated. What other ideas might you try?" "You and Sarah had a problem with the necklace. What did you both decide to do?"

- *Make positive connections.* Children and families need to be connected to a spectrum of people and programs that support resiliency. Just as individuals can be resilient, schools, programs, and communities can also be resilient and be sources for building resiliency. Plan ways to make children and families feel connected to the school program. Try holding an open house, where families can interact with each other and staff. Talk positively to the children about each other, notice when someone is absent, work in small and large groups, and hold parent meetings. Share community programs with families that support resiliency factors such as libraries/librarians, social services, the arts, sports, and nature groups.
- *Discover, celebrate, and grow children's strengths.* When children view themselves as competent and needed contributors, they have far better self-confidence. Self-confidence leads to a positive outlook and belief in oneself (and one's abilities), all important to resiliency. Observe activities, play, and relationships to discover children's strengths, interests, and what excites them or makes them happy. Plan opportunities for children to practice and use their strengths and interests. Create opportunities for children to be responsible helpers, try new experiences, and have success.
- *Read and talk.* Reading and storytelling are wonderful sensory calming activities and can introduce children to concepts and topics that enrich resiliency development. Use stories as a way to provoke discussions that encourage children to share their thoughts, identify emotions, and simply to bring pleasure.
- *Explore character strengths and actions.* Talk with children about character; who we are and what we do (or how we act). Optimism, persistence, empathy, gratitude, kindness, fairness, and so forth,



are all important to explore in becoming resilient. Developing our character strengths helps us decide how to act. "You were being kind and fair with Jamal when you let him have a turn with the ball." "You were so persistent when you kept building your tower after it fell down."

### References:

Brooks, Robert. *Raising Resilient Children*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2001.

Pizzaolongo, Peter, and Amy Hunter. "I am Safe and Secure: Promoting Resilience in Young Children." *Young Children* (March 2011): 67-69.

Meichenbaum, Donald. "Bolstering Resilience: Benefitting from Lessons Learned." Paper presented at Melissa Institute for Violence Prevention and Treatment, Miami, FL, May 2008. American Psychological Association. "Resilience Guide for Parents and Teachers." Accessed October 5, 2011. <http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/resilience.aspx>

Windows of Opportunity Blog. [greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/windows\\_of\\_opportunity/](http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/windows_of_opportunity/)

## BETTER · KID · CARE

**Becoming Resilient: Ideas to Build On** October 2011

Claudia C. Mincemoyer, Ph.D., Better Kid Care Program Director  
The Penn State Cooperative Extension Better Kid Care Program.  
341 North Science Park Road - Suite 208, State College, PA 16803;  
Phone 1-800-452-9108. Website: [www.betterkidcare.psu.edu](http://www.betterkidcare.psu.edu).

### Developed by:

Christine Belinda, Penn State Better Kid Care Program, Penn State University