

# The Ability to Cope

## Building Resilience for Yourself and Your Child

### For Families

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**M**any families face difficult situations, including parental depression, community violence, and poverty. Managing adversities like these can be painful for both parents and children. Resilience is the ability to cope effectively with the stress caused by such challenging situations. Research on children facing such problems has shown that many children show resilience and do

surprisingly well. Resilience isn't something that people are born with – so as a parent, you can encourage resilience in your child and develop it in yourself. Remember – even those children who are facing the most difficult life situations may grow and thrive. Fostering resilience in yourself and your child can help you both be stronger and more connected to others. It can also help you be more effective as a parent.

## How Can I Help Build Resilience in My Child and Myself?

It is possible to build family strengths even while living under stressful conditions or during difficult times. The following are tips for fostering resilience — putting energy into even one of these activities each day can help you and your child.

**Take good care of yourself and show your child that you're doing it.** Make time to take care of yourself through daily activities such as healthy eating, exercise, spiritual practice, artistic expression, and rest. This supports your efforts to feel strong and models for your child good habits that can last throughout his or her lifetime. Another important part of self-care is to remain connected to others, such as family and friends, and the larger communities from which they come. This can mean engaging in prayer groups, volunteer activities, or family gatherings that might provide a space where you feel accepted and not alone. Your good self-care, including your attention to family and friends, will help foster the bond with your child.

**Build a strong parent-child bond.** Develop a loving bond with your child by showing affection and responding to his or her needs. Nurturing your child with warmth and attention can help him or her feel secure and support your own effectiveness as a parent. Although this may sound like something every parent hopes to achieve, if you are feeling depressed or stressed, such attention may be hard to muster up regularly. Try planning a simple activity together every day, like having an

after school snack together, reading a book or watching a favorite TV show, or making a meal. The important part is the consistency of your attention.

**Encourage social skills.** As difficult as it can be for us to admit we are struggling, reaching out to your own friends can give you support and reduce feelings of isolation during times of stress and crisis. Oftentimes your friends may reach out to you first. Accepting that support can help your child see the value of having friends and getting along with others. Think about situations where your child can be with others and make friends. Make time for and encourage him or her to play with children and participate in positive group activities such as sports or clubs. This can be another shared bonding activity, if you and your child join sports or play groups together. Try new activities, and acknowledge your child's efforts and successes. Help your child learn from hardships or mistakes. Be patient with yourself and acknowledge your own successes, big and small.

**Maintain a daily routine.** Knowing what to expect day by day and at different times of the day helps children grow and have a sense of security. Keep consistency at home by making sure your child has a routine in the morning,

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attends school, gets to bed at around the same time, and experiences the same rituals each night. Simple daily family rituals with your child such as eating together, singing favorite songs or reading a story together before bedtime can be very valuable. Also, regularly engaging in positive community experiences as part of the weekly routine is valuable: these might include church youth or children's groups, sports teams, theatre or art programs, after-school clubs or events. These can be opportunities for your child to build individual strengths while also connecting with your culture.

**Talk to your child about the challenges and difficulties the family has been through together in a way he or she can understand.**

Parents often believe that if they do not talk about a major stressful situation in front of their child, the child will not know that there is a problem. In some cultures, there is strong stigma that keeps us from admitting we are having difficulty or feeling blue. But children are very sensitive to parental stress and usually sense that something is wrong. Often an unspoken issue is more stressful than one that is out in the open. This does not mean that children should be engaged in adult problems, but they should know that the family can talk about difficulties, and the difficulties are not something the child has caused. A simple statement like "Mommy is mad at something that happened at work" or "Daddy is sad that grandpa is sick" may be enough. Listen carefully to any questions your child may have and take care to answer them in a way that helps them feel as safe as possible.

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**Focus on hope and appreciation.** Take some time regularly to reflect on the positive aspects of your life. Involve yourself with people and organizations that bolster your sense of hope, healing, and a belief in a good life ahead for you and your family. For some, believing in a higher power can help us get through especially challenging or painful times. Encourage your child to be positive about the future by sharing your dreams and goals with them and hearing about theirs. Encourage your child to have fun, play, and enjoy positive aspects of his or her childhood. Investigate some safe and inexpensive places to go in the neighborhood such as your local public library or park. Getting out can do you both some good!

Raising your child can include challenges under the best circumstances. If you need help or have questions take advantage of the resources around you: talk to your child's teacher, other relatives, a neighbor, or professionals in the community. Being a source of encouragement and support can be one of the most important things you do for your child and for yourself.

## Additional Family Connections Resources

### Short Papers

Parenting Through Tough Times: Coping with Depression <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/parenting-through-tough-times.pdf>

Self-Reflection in Parenting: Help for Getting Through Stressful Times <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/self-reflection-in-parenting.pdf>

### Other Resources

American Psychological Association. Resilience Guide for Parents and Teachers. Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/resilience.aspx>

Beardslee, W. R. and Jacobs, D. G. (2002). Can a depressed parent be a good parent? You bet! [PDF file] *Children's Hospital Boston and Screening for Mental Health, Inc.*, Boston, Massachusetts. Retrieved from [http://www.commonwealthfund.org/usr\\_doc/can\\_a\\_depressed\\_parent.pdf](http://www.commonwealthfund.org/usr_doc/can_a_depressed_parent.pdf)

Grotberg, E. H. (1995). *A Guide to Promoting Resilience in Children: Strengthening the Human Spirit*. The Hague, The Netherlands: Bernard van Leer Foundation.



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