

## **The Little Things are the Big Things – Building Resilience in Children**

Today's modern world is full of so many innovations, knowledge and new ways of doing things, we should all be in great shape! Unfortunately we are not. From the many phone calls and emails I get from parents and teachers who are deeply concerned about our children and teenagers and how they are managing and coping with the pressures of modern living, we have reached a new level of concern. Research and statistics also support the perception of the declining health and well being of our young. Of most concern is the increasing numbers of children and adolescents who are succumbing to depression, emotional instability, mental illnesses, obesity and low educational and social competence. Today's children are struggling!

Many of the pressures and challenges are invisible. What can be helpful on one level can be destructive on another level like TV's, mobile phones, the Internet and mp3 players. Being affluent and having the ability to give your children things you were unable to have as a child, should be a good thing. Unfortunately affluence can create more challenges to raising resilient children than financial challenge or adversity. The very experience of having to save for something or wait for it makes the receiving of what is desired so much sweeter. Being able to delay gratification is seen as key quality of an emotionally mature person. The "Y" generation has immediate access to plastic credit, and the temptations that brings before they have the maturity to manage the full consequences of their actions. These are attributes of emotional intelligence. We now know more than ever before how the human brain develops and grows and this has massive implications for parents and parenting.

### **What is resilience?**

Resilience refers to one's ability to successfully manage one's life and to successfully adapt to change and stressful events in healthy and constructive ways. In simplistic terms, it is our survivability and "bounce-back-ability" to life experiences and that means both the really advantageous ones as well as the really challenging, traumatic ones. Young people have always needed effective coping skills, however the modern world is more challenging than ever before, and it appears that many young people have fewer resources to deal with adversity than in previous generations. Our main concerns today involve the increasing numbers of our young who are aggressive, depressed, suicidal and engaging in maladaptive coping strategies such as substance abuse and anti-social behaviour.

The need to improve everyone's understanding of resilience is essential for parents and carers of children because it will offer insights into how to protect our children from the damaging effects of the pressures of our increasingly chaotic and uncertain world. Resilience should be understood as a vital ingredient in the process of parenting all children, a process that directs our interactions as we strengthen our children's ability to meet life's challenges and pressures with confidence and perseverance.

*"Thirty years of research tells us that resilient people are happier, live longer and are more successful in school and jobs, are happier in relationships and are less likely to suffer depression."*

K. Reivich and A. Shatte " (2002); Werner, E. & Smith, R. (2001). Journeys from childhood to midlife: risk, resilience, and recovery.

The early years, indeed from conception, are unbelievably important in helping help our children be better equipped to live in this chaotic world with constant, rapid change. There are some key building blocks that strengthen the ability to be resilient, to "bounce back" from

the bumps and bruises of life. These building blocks create vital protective factors that strengthen one's capacity to cope and especially to overcome adversity and these building blocks begin at conception!

The early years of a child's life have always been important. However, it is not only the child's physical and intellectual development that is developing rapidly in the first years of life, it is the emotional and social. Most of the important developments are invisible and difficult to measure. Often the little things are the big things.

Children still need the basics – plenty of loving interaction with significant people who care for them, enormous amounts of play and opportunities to make mistakes and learn from them. You don't need a lot of money to raise children well – you just need to do the above.

## **10 Resilience Building Blocks for Children 0-12**

1. Positive healthy pregnancy
  2. Good Nutrition
  3. Safe, nurturing care within the circle of family
  4. Plenty of play
  5. Build Life Skills
  6. Meaningful Involvement with Positive Adults
  7. Clear boundaries
  8. Absence of stress
  9. Self Mastery
  10. Strengthen the Spirit
- Maggie Dent 2006 ©

My resilience model outlines 10 key building blocks for 0-12 that build healthy self esteem, strengthen children's ability to be resilient and bounce back from life's challenges. These building blocks clearly show the different areas that a parent, school or community can focus on in order to build resilience for life. Any building block will help, and the more the better! The only one that can only be done once is obviously the first building block – positive, healthy pregnancy!

The little things are often the big things later. A baby who is soothed often and quickly when distressed tends to become self soothing as a toddler. The food patterns that a parent creates in the first two years of life will tend to stay with the child for life. So children who are not introduced to sweet drinks and high fat, high processed foods like potato crisps in the first two years will be less inclined to have an emotional or comfort need to eat them as an adult! Children who have been able to play freely in the natural world with little parental supervision often tend to have stronger "seeking" or enquiring thinking patterns as an adult than children who have largely experienced structured or adult lead play. Simple life skills for adults are not simple for children. Effective tooth cleaning, managing to eat with cutlery, managing a successful nose blow and tying up shoe laces are all serious life skills that need to be taught with patience and compassion. Children interpret their world through their eyes and can judge themselves to be dumb or stupid if they find themselves in the company of another child who has competency in these simple skills and they do not.

There are many, many steps in the 10 building blocks that impact on children for the rest of their life and too many to cover in this article. Needless to say, there is no simple process that allows you to progress one step at a time because all children are created uniquely and their development is determined by many different factors – seen and unseen. Parents need

to be constantly reviewing what is happening in each of the children's lives. This act of reflection with the other parent or family member or other person deeply involved in their child's life is very helpful to stay in tune with an individual child's development. Please avoid comparing children – that is disrespectful of the child's individuality and essential human potential and has the tendency to invalidate the child. Children need to experience disappointment, challenge, failure and boundaries to fully develop the interpersonal and personal skills that allow people to live in society. They also need to have a voice, and age dependent moments of autonomy where they get to have a sense of control over their life. However, too much will lead to overindulgent, permissive and unpleasantly challenging behaviour that will create conflict and distress. Young children need help to manage strong negative feelings and learn how to communicate their needs to significant adults. Unmet needs are the main driver for inappropriate behaviour in children – and helping them to understand what need is unmet is unbelievably important for later life. This is where children learn the difference between assertiveness, passivity and aggression.

Everyone has a tool kit of life skills that they have accumulated throughout their life. Children have an imaginary tool kit hanging off their shoulder. A simple metaphor to remember in building resilience in children is the more tools in their tool kit, the more resilient that will be. It is the primary responsibility of parents to be filling that tool kit. It is not teachers or child care workers to fill it. They merely add to the basic tools that are already present.

Finally memories from childhood build patterns of expectation in the brain for life. Children who have experience repeated "magic" moments like night time rituals of snuggling up with a book, singing songs in the car, Easter egg hunts or picking mushrooms tend to anticipate positive and optimistic moments in life. The stronger a child's imagination especially under 10, the more likely they will be able to avoid depression, cynicism and criticism as adults. This is the last building block – strengthening the spirit. Childhood is meant to be full of chaos, endless play, spontaneity, laughter and moments of wonder and awe! Let your inner child come out and play before they become teenagers, when they will only see you as an embarrassment. Consciously create the magic moments that build delight and lightness – turn the screens off, play music, share meals and tell jokes. Anything that builds the sense of belonging, valued and noticed.

These are just a few of the little things that become big things later in life.

"Human connectedness is the key to resilience, authentic happiness and a sense of well being. This can only be achieved through the recognition, honouring and nurturing of the human spirit that exists within every child ever born."

Maggie Dent, *Saving Our Children from Our Chaotic World*, 2003.