

Questions and Answers about Resilience

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In the May 14, 2001 issue of Newsweek, Dr. Sam Goldstein and I were interviewed about the topic of resilience. As a result of space limitations it was not possible for Newsweek to reprint all of the questions they posed nor all of our answers. We provided a link from our websites to the Newsweek article but that link is no longer functional. We have received a number of e-mails asking how to obtain the questions as well as our responses to the Newsweek article. Given this interest, my September newsletter contains the full set of questions posed by Newsweek and our responses to these questions.

Question: Resilience seems to be one of those values taught more by experience, or exposure to some type of hardship. Is there a way of teaching children resilience without allowing them to be subjected to situations that parents may not feel good about?

Answer: The term resilience has typically been applied to children who have overcome difficult situations such as abuse, neglect, poverty, or school failure and gone on to lead satisfying, successful lives. These individuals possess what we call a resilient mindset. Such a mindset includes some of the following features and skills: they believe that there are adults who relate to them with unconditional love and are available for support and encouragement, they have excellent problem-solving skills, they demonstrate self-discipline, they are optimistic and recognize their strengths, and they view mistakes as experiences from which to learn. However, we do not believe that parents have to expose their children to undue hardship to develop this mindset since all youngsters will experience some stress and pressure as part of the process of growing up. We believe that if parents understand the components of a resilient mindset, then all of their interactions with their children can be guided by strengthening this mindset whether their children face major stress or not. In effect, we advocate that just as children are inoculated to avoid physical disease, we should strive to inoculate them for the challenges they will face and we can accomplish this by nurturing a resilient mindset.

Question: You spoke of "empathizing" with your children, seeing the world through their eyes, as a step to raising resilient kids. If your kid tries to justify why he got into a fight with another kid in school, how can you show empathy if you realize it was your child's fault?

Answer: We have found that many parents confuse empathy with giving in to their children or not holding them accountable for their actions. However, empathy has nothing to do with giving in or making excuses for our children's unacceptable behaviors. Rather, empathy involves seeing the world through our children's eyes and asking such questions as, "How can I speak with my children so that they will be most responsive to hearing what I have to say?" and "Would I want anyone to speak to me the way I am speaking with my child?" Thus, if your child started a fight in school, an empathic parent would attempt to discover what happened, would acknowledge the feelings the child expressed (e.g., "I know you were angry"), would not be overly punitive but would discuss with the child why the behavior is not acceptable and have the child consider more appropriate ways of showing feelings. An empathic parent would also employ consequences that would lead the child to learn from the situation. It is our belief that the more empathic parents are, the better able they can teach their children right from wrong.

Question: When should parents begin practicing effective communication with their children?

Answer: Effective communication should begin at birth even before children understand the words we are using or are able to use words themselves. We must remember that we communicate love to infants by holding and cuddling them and speaking with them in warm and soft tones and that we help to develop language by speaking with them. These actions set the stage for later, more sophisticated communication when our children are able to use words of their own and respond to our words. As children develop these skills, it is important for parents to keep in mind that an important component of effective communication is to listen actively to our children and attempt to understand what they are saying to us. This, of course, also involves our ability to be empathic.

Question: Are children's temperaments the same from birth? Or can parents shape those temperaments along the way?

Answer: Researchers have found that the temperament of children even within the same family can vary greatly from birth. Some children are born easier to satisfy and soothe and possess a happy demeanor, others are born more cautious and shy, while still others come into the world difficult to please, seeming to be constantly unsatisfied. However, a child's temperament and view of the world can be greatly influenced by parents. This influence will be positive as long as parents understand and appreciate the unique biological make-up of each child. As an example, if your child has a strong-willed temperament and quickly experiences any request you make as unfair, it would be important to build in as many choices as possible. While this approach is also indicated for a child with an easy temperament, it is even of greater necessity for a child who possesses what has been called a "difficult" temperament lest power struggles arise. Thus, if bedtime is a problem, parents might ask, "Would you like to be reminded five minutes or ten minutes before bedtime that it is time to get ready for bed?" If cleaning up is a problem, the following question should help, "Do you want to clean up your toys by yourself or would you like me to help? It's your choice." This strategy fosters a sense of ownership and resilience in children, thereby lessening the feeling that the world is unfair.

Question: You ask parents to evaluate their relationship with their own parents and assess those things that gave them strength and those they resented as children. What should parents accomplish after this exercise?

Answer: We believe that reflecting upon our childhood experiences with our parents can serve as a guide for our interactions with our own children. This exercise helps parents to become more empathic and to modify their behavior towards their children by prompting them to ask the following questions: "What is it that my parents said or did that boosted my feelings of self-worth and confidence and am I saying the same kinds of things to my children?" "What is it that my parents said or did that lessened my sense of self-worth and caused friction in my relationship with my parents and am I making certain that I don't say or do similar things with my children?" Many parents have told us that this exercise helped them to improve the ways in which they interacted with their children, thereby facilitating the development of a resilient mindset.

Question: Can you give a specific example of a "negative script" and how that can be rewritten?

Answer: We use the term “negative script” to refer to behaviors that parents repeat over and over when relating to their children that are not only ineffective but actually lead to a deterioration in the parent-child relationship. These scripts are so well entrenched that even when parents know they are ineffective, many find it difficult to change. We believe that if we are doing something as parents that is not working then we have the responsibility of changing our script and doing something different. Our flexibility will often reinforce a more cooperative, flexible attitude in our children. One example of a negative script involved parents of a child who was having difficulty in school. Each evening for years they lectured the child to “try harder” and put in more of an effort. However, the child continued to struggle, which caused the parents to say even more often, “Try harder, you could do the work if you wanted to.” Eventually, an evaluation revealed subtle learning problems that were interfering with this child’s performance. Only when the parents changed their script by obtaining tutorial help and by empathizing with their child’s struggles was this child able to feel more comfortable and confident about doing his homework and succeeding at school.

Question: Please explain the idea of "islands of competence"?

Answer: We use the metaphor of “islands of competence” to refer to the areas of strength that each child possesses. Since children are more likely to develop a resilient mindset and confidence when they are aware of their strengths and know that these strengths are valued by their parents, it is especially important for parents to identify and reinforce their children’s islands of competence. In our work we ask parents to make a list of their child’s strengths and we then consider how to build upon these islands. For example, we knew one child who struggled with reading and consequently, became increasingly anxious about school. His parents identified his artwork as an island of competence. Consequently, with the support of his teacher and principal he created colorful signs that were located in the lobby of the school, such as “Welcome” or “Visitors, please report to the office.” Thus, the first thing he saw each morning when he entered the school were examples of his strengths displayed, helping him to feel more self-assured and less anxious. Rather than always trying to “fix” our children we should search for ways to build on their strengths.

Question: When you tell parents to "accept their kids for who they are, not what you want them to be," does this mean if your girl is shy and a bit unsociable, you won't attempt to draw her out of her shell?

Answer: Accepting children for who they are does not imply that we don't help them to change, especially if their behaviors are problematic. If we have a son whose temperament includes a short fuse, acceptance means that we recognize that our son has a short fuse but that we find ways to help him deal more effectively with frustration and anger. In the case of a shy daughter, acceptance means we don't angrily exhort her to speak up nor do we ignore her difficulties but rather we accept that this is her temperament and that there are ways we can help her. Thus, parents might say to their daughter, "We know it's not easy for you to say hello to people you don't know. It's not easy for a lot of kids. But I think we can figure out ways to make it easier. A lot of kids who have trouble saying hello when they're younger find that it gets easier as they get older." Setting a more understanding, hopeful, problem-solving tone will help to modify this girl's shyness.

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