

Are You a Parent Possessing a Mindset to Foster Resilience in Your Children?

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My intent was for this month's newsletter to be Part III of my series about discipline. However, I have decided to postpone the discipline article until June. Instead Dr. Sam Goldstein and I were asked by a parenting website to create a quiz that might help parents (and other caregivers) to assess whether they possessed a mindset that fostered resilience in children. We developed 10 questions based on the guideposts we discuss in our book "Raising Resilient Children." While we wish to emphasize that this is not a test that has been validated scientifically or statistically, we thought our readers would be interested in reviewing the questions and our responses. It is our hope that such a review will help you to reflect upon your own parenting (or teaching) style and examine whether it is a style that strengthens resilience in children. The questions are meant to provoke thinking about one's interactions with children and not to offer definitive answers for every parenting situation.

The Quiz

If we examine our parental goals, it would not be an oversimplification to conclude that to realize the goals of helping our children be happy and successful requires them to possess the inner strength to deal competently and successfully with the challenges and demands they encounter. We call this capacity to cope and feel competent resilience. Numerous scientific studies support the importance of resilience as a powerful force in helping children overcome not only significant adversity but everyday stresses. Resilient children possess certain qualities and ways of viewing themselves and the world that are not apparent in youngsters who have not been successful in meeting challenges and pressures. Resilient youngsters are able to translate this view or mindset into effective action. Resilient children are hopeful and possess high self-worth.

We believe that when parents are engaged in the process of raising resilient youngsters they possess an understanding of what they can do in all of their interactions with their children to nurture a resilient mindset and behaviors. The following brief quiz will help you evaluate the extent to which your words and actions are reinforcing a

resilient mindset in your children. Scoring high is an indication that you possess an understanding of the guidelines necessary to foster resilience in your children. If you do not attain a high score, the good news is that with patience and effort, you can develop such a mindset.

1. My child leaves a favorite toy outside overnight. Though I've repeatedly reminded my child that the toy might "disappear" if left out, my reminders were not heeded. The next morning, the toy is gone and my child is crying. I would:

- a. Tell my child, "I told you so."
- b. Begin by empathizing with their unhappiness and saying, "I know you're upset that the toy is gone."
- c. Punish them.
- d. Buy them another toy.

2. When my child disagrees with me, it often appears that her goal is to make me angry or seek revenge. She will scream and yell and tell me that I'm not a good mother. When this happens, I should:

- a. Ignore her anger.
- b. Punish her more severely so she learns how to behave appropriately more quickly.
- c. Allow her to rant and rave until she runs out of steam.
- d. Acknowledge her anger but not change my plan.

3. Which of these statements is true?

- a. All children are basically the same when it comes to discipline and therefore discipline practices should be applied equally.
- b. Changing my approach will spoil my child.
- c. Our children should be more appreciative of our hard work and parental effort.
- d. Just because a particular strategy worked with me when I was a child does not mean it will be effective with my child.

4. In problem situations between parents and a child, the initial responsibility for change falls upon:

- a. Parents

- b. The child
 - c. Both parties
 - d. The counselor
5. Which of the following will help children feel loved, special, and appreciated?
- a. Creating traditions and special times with them.
 - b. Making certain to not miss significant events.
 - c. Accepting your children for who they are, not what you want them to be.
 - d. All of the above.
6. What's is the best way to deal with mistakes:
- a. Serve as a model for dealing with mistakes and setbacks.
 - b. Teach your children that mistakes are to be avoided.
 - c. Lower your expectations so that your children will never make mistakes.
 - d. Ignore them.
7. Your child tells you that he feels ugly and dumb. Your first response should be:
- a. "But, you're not ugly and dumb."
 - b. "I know you feel that way. I'm not certain why you do but maybe we can figure out what will help you feel better."
 - c. "If you keep feeling that way, no one will want to be with you."
 - d. "I really get upset when you say those things."
8. Which of these statements is true?
- a. Spanking is one of the most effective consequences to develop self-discipline.
 - b. Children who are spanked more often have been found to become more cooperative with their peers.
 - c. Spanking as a form of punishment develops problem-solving skills in children.
 - d. Children who are spanked have been found to become more aggressive with other children.
9. When your children are successful at a task, you can reinforce a resilient mindset by saying:
- a. "I'm glad I was here to help you since you would not have been able to do it on your own."
 - b. "It was great to see how you figured that out."

- c. “Now that you see you can succeed, you shouldn’t make excuses for not trying something in the future.”
 - d. All of the above.
10. At an early age it is important for parents to:
- a. Provide opportunities for children to help others.
 - b. Involve them in making age-appropriate choices.
 - c. Use time-out as the main form of discipline.
 - d. All of the above.
 - e. a & b

The following are the answers that we believe indicate an understanding of how to reinforce a resilient mindset in children with our explanations:

1. **b.** The ability to see the world through your children’s eyes and be empathic is essential for fostering resilience. You don’t have to agree with everything they do but try to appreciate and validate their point of view as a bridge to begin every communication and as a foundation for them to listen and learn from you. In this instance, saying to your child, “I know that you’re upset that the toy is gone” is an empathic statement that is not judgmental or accusatory, thereby lessening the probability that your child will become defensive. Telling them “I told you so” or punishing them is likely to lead to anger and resentment rather than learning. Buying them a new toy is also counterproductive since it does not permit them to experience the consequences of their behavior. If children do not realize that there are consequences to their actions, they will have difficulty developing self-discipline which is a major component of a resilient mindset.

2. **d.** When you interact with your children you should always consider whether you are saying things in a way that will allow them to be receptive to listening to you. If you interrupt, put them down, tell them how they should be feeling or use absolutes such as always or never in a critical way they are likely to become angry and tune you out. Begin by communicating that you hear what they are

saying but then explain why their behavior will not alter your actions. In this example, you can say to your child in a calm voice that you know she is angry, but her yelling and saying you are not a good mother will not change the situation. Even if you believe she is yelling to make you angry, it is important not to confirm this feeling by yelling back at her. To do so will only fuel her anger. When she has settled down and is in a more receptive mood to listen, you can discuss with her what it is that might be upsetting her.

3. **d.** We tend to parent the way we were parented. However, the world has changed dramatically in the last twenty-five years. Reward and punishment strategies that may have been effective when we were children may not necessarily be as effective with our children. Many children are likely to challenge some of the limits we set as parents. Also, since every child is different temperamentally from birth, if your children have different temperaments than you do, what worked when you were growing up might not work for them. For example, if you were a temperamentally easy-going child but you have a child who is more strong-willed, it is not likely that your child will immediately comply with your setting limits. While you still have to set limits you may have to build in more choices so that a power struggle is not generated. For example, instead of saying to your child, "It is time to go to bed," you might have to say, "Do you want me to remind you five minutes or ten minutes before it is time to go to bed." While this kind of choice is helpful for all children, it is especially useful for youngsters who are quick to experience requests as impositions. And we must remember that if an approach doesn't work, it makes more sense to change it than continue to use the same ineffective strategy. This does not mean giving in to our children as long as the new approach holds them responsible for their actions.

4. **a.** Some parents believe that it is the responsibility of the child to make the first changes when there is conflict or a problem. They assume that if they make the first changes they might be giving in to the child and that the child will become spoiled. We believe the opposite to be true, namely, that if problematic

situations are to improve and if children are to become more accountable, it is typically the parent who must take the initiative. As parents your ability to modify your behavior models flexibility, adaptability, and receptiveness to new ideas and solutions. The goal is for your children to accept increasing responsibility and handle challenges and conflict more effectively as they develop. They will be better able to do so if you have demonstrated this behavior for them. It's important to remember that as you take the initiative in dealing with problem situations your children may not respond favorably at first but if you remain fair and consistent it is likely that your children will be more open to changing their behavior. On the other side of the coin, don't fall into a trap of rescuing your children and not providing them with opportunities to learn how to deal with these situations. It is difficult for children to become responsible if opportunities for such behavior are limited by parental overprotection.

5. **d.** There are many opportunities for parents to convey to children that they are loved and appreciated. One of the most powerful messages we can give is that we accept them for who they are. Our children may not always fulfill the expectations or dreams we have for them, but it is important that our love and acceptance not waver. If children constantly feel that they have disappointed their parents, it is difficult for them to develop a more optimistic, hopeful outlook. As parents, we must constantly assess how realistic our expectations are and make modifications when indicated. Love is also communicated by creating traditions and special times with them. Saying to a young child, "When I read to you each night, it is such a special time that even if the phone rings I won't answer" is but one example of vividly demonstrating your priorities as a parent. Being present at their sporting events or concerts or plays and letting them know how much you enjoy watching them in these activities conveys love. We must avoid losing those precious moments that help our children to feel we really care about them and love them.

6. **a.** Ask yourself what your children observe when you make mistakes. Kids are acutely aware of how parents deal with setbacks and failure. If they witness their parents over-react to mistakes they are more likely to fear mistakes and avoid taking risks. In contrast, if children see their parents respond by remaining calm and seeking more effective solutions, they will be more prone to acting in the same way. Mistakes are a natural part of life for kids and grown-ups. Most mistakes serve as opportunities for learning and parents must model this more positive view if their children are to develop a resilient mindset. We must also avoid the temptation to rush in and protect our children from possible failure or to lower our expectations so that our children are not challenged; if we do so, we rob our children of experiences from which they can discover what they are capable of doing.

7. **b.** In most situations when we hear our children say negative things about themselves such as that they are ugly and dumb, our first inclination is to quickly support them by telling them that they are not that way at all. However, this kind of support, even if rooted in the best intentions, represents a missed opportunity to validate what our child is telling us and consequently, compromises effective communication. We must remember that validating what our children say does not mean we agree with them, but rather that we understand them. The feeling that one has been heard and validated is a critical component in helping children develop resilience. Thus, a parent might respond to their child's negative statement by saying, "I know you feel ugly and dumb and I'm sorry you do. I don't see it that way and maybe we can figure out what makes you feel that way and what will help you to feel better." This kind of statement is more likely to prompt your child to seek solutions to the negative feelings. Also, if our response is critical such as "no one will like you if you feel that way," our children will be less prone to examine and change their behavior. Finally, we can let them know that it is upsetting when we hear them say negative things about themselves, but our first message should be one of empathy about how they are feeling.

8. **d.** The true meaning of the word discipline is “to teach.” This, the optimal goal is to nurture self-discipline so that children will act responsibly even when we are not around. Researchers have demonstrated that spanking is not only an ineffective way of helping children develop self-discipline but actually leads them to demonstrate more aggressive behavior towards others. Children who are spanked are taught that the way you solve problems is through hitting. They are robbed of opportunities to find more adaptive ways of behaving and of developing their problem-solving skills. Some parents believe that corporal punishment is an effective way of stopping a child’s misbehavior since many children will stop the behavior at that moment. However, it is often a temporary “cure” since the misbehavior persists and, if anything, the child’s resentment towards the parent increases. The greater the anger and resentment the less likely the child is to learn from and respect the parent. We believe that parents who spank must seek alternative ways of teaching their children.

9. **b.** One of the characteristics of resilient kids is that they relish and take realistic credit for their successes. Their sense of accomplishment and pride gives them the confidence to persevere the next time they face a challenge. Thus, it is important for parents to acknowledge and highlight the ways in which their children contribute to their own success. If you communicate to your children that they could not have been successful without your help, they will develop the mindset that their achievements are not truly their own. If you tell them that since they were successful they should not make excuses for not trying something in the future, you are lessening the sense of accomplishment they feel at that moment; thus, your statement will not be experienced as encouragement but rather as a warning.

10. **e.** From an early age kids love to be helpful. When we enlist their help we communicate our faith in their ability to handle a variety of tasks and convey our belief that they have something valuable to offer—a feeling that nurtures a sense of responsibility and a resilient mindset. Even when our children are three or four

years old, we should say that we need their assistance in certain household responsibilities. Resilience is also reinforced when we help our children to learn how to make choices and decisions in keeping with their developmental level. Children with solid problem-solving skills are not afraid when faced with challenging situations since they have the capacity to figure out what to do. Finally, while time-out is frequently used as a form of discipline, we believe that for most children it is not a major strategy to foster resilience. Actually, the use of time-out with strong-willed children often backfires since they often refuse to comply with their parents request; in such instances, the withdrawal of privileges through the use of logical consequences (i.e., something the parent has control of) is a more effective technique.

Give yourself 1 point for each correct answer. If you scored:

8-10 – You possess the mindset of a parent (or other caregiver) capable of fostering resilience in your children. You help your children to feel loved, to solve problems, to accept responsibility for their actions, to give back to their community, to deal effectively with both success and mistakes. You constantly communicate that you accept them for who they are and appreciate their unique temperament and interests. In your actions you convey that being a parent is of paramount importance to you and that you will be available to your children and involved in their lives in a loving, caring way.

6-7 – You are beginning to understand the concepts of fostering resilience but have some work to do. Examine the areas in which you are nurturing a resilient mindset in your children and continue those practices. Most importantly, review the areas in which your actions may be working against your children become resilient and make a plan to change these behaviors. Since changing our “scripts” takes time and energy, don’t attempt to do too much at once or your efforts are likely to lead to frustration and failure. Instead, focus on one behavior to change and when you have experienced success with that area move to another one. Watch the positive feedback you receive from your children.

5 or below – It will be important for you to rethink your goals as a parent. Many loving parents fall into the trap of behaving in ways that work against their children developing a resilient mindset. Carefully review your answers to all 10 questions and consider ways in which your actions are fostering resilience in your children. Then, as we recommended above, select one or two areas to work on. Once you have had some success, you can move one to other areas. If you find that you are not able to change some of your usual ways of responding to your children, you may need the support of a friend or a child development specialist. Although you may have to expend a great deal of energy to change your parenting style, think about the alternative if you do not engage in this process of change. Always keep in mind that one of the greatest gifts we can reinforce in our children is that of demonstrating resilience.

Parents (and other caregivers) possessing the mindset to foster resilience in children, know about and appreciate the components of resilience so that their interactions with their children are guided by a blueprint of important principles, ideas, and actions. Grasping the complexities of this blueprint, however, is an ongoing process filled with challenges, frustrations, setbacks and successes. In our book, “Raising Resilient Children,” we offer 10 guideposts and multiple strategies to help. Though some may wish for a true-proved golden path to the future, such a path does not exist. However, you can be comforted by the knowledge that these guideposts will help you traverse and appreciate each child’s unique strengths and truly foster a resilient mindset.

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