

## Resiliency and Young Children

### Providing Opportunities to Build Skills: Empathy

#### What is resiliency?

Resiliency is the ability to cope with new or stressful situations, changes, problems, or opportunities. Resilient children use skills that they have developed from past experiences to cope better with new situations as they arise. These help them to adapt to new situations and continue to learn new coping skills that they can use in the future.

#### Why is resilience important?

Life is not stress free. All people experience stress, change, problems, and opportunities in their lives. Caregivers can help children learn skills to deal with stress. Children can start learning these skills at a very young age.

#### What are resiliency skills?

People who are resilient have three main abilities. These are the ability to relax, reflect, and respond. These can be further broken down into seven resiliency skills. Each skill forms the basis on which other skills can be built. These include emotional regulation, impulse control, causal analysis, empathy, realistic optimism, self-efficacy, and reaching out.

It is important for children to learn resiliency skills when they are not experiencing stress. When we experience stress, different areas of our brains are activated and the areas that are in charge of learning are not working at their best level. If children learn resiliency skills when they are calm, they are more likely to retain the information and to use the skills when needed.

#### Empathy

Empathy means the ability to identify and understand other people's situations and feelings. Empathy begins when children learn to differentiate between themselves and other people. Some people think that females are more empathetic than males. Both genders need to learn to be empathetic.

*The following are practical strategies to help children develop empathy:*

#### MODEL

- The most important way that you can help children to become empathetic is to be empathetic towards them. Reflect their emotions back to them. Talk to them about times you have experienced similar emotions. Explain that all feelings are okay.
- Talk to children about your own emotions and what they feel like. For example, do your shoulders get tight when you are angry? Do you feel sick to your stomach when you are nervous? Do you feel like you have cotton balls in your head when you are confused?
- Practice each of the strategies in this fact sheet with children. When you are using any of the strategies throughout the day, talk to children about what you are doing and why. For example, "You were really supportive when you gave daddy a hug when he was sad. I think it made him feel better."
- When children are successful at using any of the strategies, praise them for this and talk about how it helped.

#### For More Information

##### Contact:

1319 Colony Street  
Saskatoon, SK S7N 2Z1  
Bus. 306.651.4300  
Fax. 306.651.4301  
info@skprevention.ca  
www.skprevention.ca

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## PROMOTE ATTACHMENT

- Attachment is the connection that a child feels towards their caregiver. When children feel loved and safe, and are responded to consistently, they will develop secure attachments. These help children learn empathy.
- Sensitively respond to children's cues. Children need to know that they are important and that their caregivers will respond to them when they need them. Sensitive responding includes being emotionally available for children, noticing and understanding the meaning of their nonverbal cues, and responding to these promptly and appropriately.
- Comfort distressed children in a regular and predictable way.
- When you are not able to meet needs immediately or have misread cues, fix or repair this break in a comforting manner. Acknowledge children's needs and explain why you were unable to respond.
- Respond to children based on their needs not the adults' needs. For example, if you are interacting and the child gives cues of being disinterested or tired, allow the child to have a break from the interaction.
- Allow children to lead play and interact with children's play as they direct you.
- One of the easiest ways we can help children regulate their emotions is by hugging them. Cuddling with a safe person can also help to calm children.

## UNDERSTANDING FEELINGS

- In order to understand someone else's emotions, children must first be able to understand their own. Please see the fact sheet **Resiliency and Young Children Providing Opportunities to Build Skills: Emotional Regulation** (Saskatchewan Prevention Institute) for more information about building resiliency skills in this area.

- Playing guessing games when in public, about what people are feeling, can teach children to look for non-verbal cues. For example, "see that little boy over there on the swings. He is telling his mom to stop because he is too high. He looks like he is holding on pretty tight and he is starting to cry. It looks like he feels scared."

## FIND OTHER EXAMPLES

- Point out examples of other people acting empathetically. "Did you see how that man let the mom and her baby go ahead of him in the grocery line? He saw that the baby was getting tired and cranky, and thought that getting through the line faster would help him and his mom feel better."

## TEACH MANNERS

- Teaching manners such as please and thank you, helps young children to understand how their actions can impact the way that other people feel and act.

## GIVE SMALL JOBS OR TASKS

- Assign small tasks that will have an impact on someone else. Once the task is completed, be sure to recognize what impact it had. For example, "you took Ralph for a walk with mommy. He really liked that. Did you see how his tail was wagging? I liked having your help too."

## COMMONALITIES

- Help children to identify what they have in common with other people. This can be done as a game with a group of children.

## References

Available upon request.