

## Resiliency and Young Children

### Providing Opportunities to Build Skills: Realistic Optimism

#### What is resiliency?

Resiliency is the ability to cope with new or stressful situations, changes, problems, or opportunities. Resilient children use coping 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 be able to use the skills when needed.

#### Realistic Optimism

Realistic optimism is the ability to maintain hope of a bright future.

#### *The following are practical strategies to help children develop realistic optimism:* **MODEL**

- 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.
- When children are successful at using any of the strategies, praise them for this and talk about how it helped.
- Challenge your own negative and positive thought processes. Challenge yourself to develop a more rounded perspective.
- Model positive explanatory styles.
  - ◆ Help children to challenge unrealistic perspectives that they might have in stressful situations. Help them to understand that the stressor will not always be present, and that it will not take over their entire life. For example, “My teacher hates me...she always yells at me.” “What did she yell at you about?” “I kicked Johnny.” “Should you kick Johnny?” “No, it is not allowed.” “So your teacher yelled at you because you kicked Johnny and it is not allowed. Did she yell at you for anything else today?” “No.” “So she doesn’t always yell at you.” “I guess not.”

#### For More Information

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- ◆ Help children to challenge beliefs that the stressor happened because of them or that they had absolutely no control over the event. For example, “Mommy and daddy got in a fight. It’s all my fault. If I wasn’t so noisy they would not be fighting.” or “My teacher is so mean. She yelled at me today. She always yells at me.”
- ◆ In difficult times, speak out loud emphasizing a positive outlook for the future.

#### **DEVELOP SELF EFFICACY**

- Developing self-efficacy, the belief that you can make a difference in the world, leads to a more optimistic outlook for the future.
- Encourage children to express their ideas and opinions in age- and context-appropriate ways.
- Please see the fact sheet Resiliency and Young Children Providing Opportunities to Build Skills: Self Efficacy (Saskatchewan Prevention Institute) for more information about building resiliency skills in this area.

#### **LOOKING AT POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE**

- It is important that children see the world through a realistic lens. If someone only looks at the positive, they are said to have “rose coloured” glasses. Only looking at the positive can be dangerous because it does not allow for recognition of factors that are not going well and can be changed or adapted. On the other hand, if someone looks at only the negative in a situation, this hinders optimism and growth.

- Have discussions with children about what went well throughout the day. “What was the best part of your day?” Encourage discussion with questions.
- Create environments that are filled with laughter, jokes, and encouragement.
- Encourage discussion about the future ... short term and long term.

#### **EMBRACE FAILURE AND MISTAKES**

- Encourage learning and taking risks. Recognize that part of taking risks means that sometimes you will not succeed or that mistakes may occur. Stress that this is OK and that we can learn from these and apply them in future situations.
- Encourage active play that incorporates problem solving.
- Encourage children to make connections between the behaviours of themselves and others and the outcomes that result.
- Try not to direct criticisms at a person, but at behaviours.

**References**  
Available upon request.