

Helping Young Children Cope with Stress: Developing Resiliency

What is resilience?

Resilience is the ability to cope with and recover from stressful situations, changes or problems. Being resilient does not mean that children will not feel distress, sadness, and other emotions. It means that children will use coping skills, support systems and self esteem that they developed in past situations to cope better with their current situation. It also means that the child will learn from the current situation and mature as a result. Resiliency grows, develops and changes throughout the lifespan.

The language of resilience is I CAN, I AM, I HAVE. For example, for a two year old this might translate to: I AM loveable, I AM safe, I CAN get comfort and support, I CAN tell mommy I am sad, I HAVE people who love me, and I HAVE a safe haven.

Why is resilience important?

Life is not stress free. It is guaranteed that each of us will experience stress, transitions, change and problems throughout our lives. How children deal with these is in part based on how they have dealt with past situations. When children are young, caregivers can help them cope with and can protect them from the negative effects of stress and harm. It is in this protected environment that children are best able to learn how to cope with stress on their own.

What do protective and risk factors mean?

Protective factors are those present in families or communities that support health and well-being. An example of a protective factor is the development of a secure attachment with a caregiver. Risk factors are those present in a community that increase

the likelihood of harm or ill health. A risk factor is the death of a loved one.

There are many factors during childhood that can protect us or put us at further risk of harm. Just one factor is usually not enough to protect or harm us. The balance of these factors is what is important. When we help children to develop resilience, we are trying to increase the protective factors in their lives, and either decrease or buffer the impact of the risk factors.

What messages can I give caregivers that will help their young children develop resilience?

- Provide unconditional love (love their children no matter what they say or do)
- Provide a stable, safe and consistent environment
- Safely express love, both physically and verbally
- Reinforce rules in a calm and kind way
- Do not belittle, harm, or reject the child when disciplining him/her
- Model behaviour that communicates confidence, self-esteem, courage, and optimism
- Praise the child for accomplishments being specific about what you are praising and why
- Encourage safe exploration and independence
- Acknowledge and name the young child's feelings
- Encourage the child to recognize and express his or her own feelings and to recognize some feelings in others
- Give the child comfort and encouragement in stressful situations

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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- Use holding, rocking, and a soothing voice to calm the child
- Encourage the child to learn self-soothing techniques (e.g., rocking themselves)
- Encourage the child to use problem-solving skills and decision-making skills
- Help the child begin to accept responsibility for his or her own behaviour and to understand consequences
- Allow the child to develop close, safe relationships with other adults and children in the community
- Encourage and model flexibility (e.g., show children that changes in schedules are normal and non-stressful)

What can I do as a service provider to help young children develop resilience?

As a service provider, you can follow many of the suggestions above as you support resilience in young children. In addition, you can:

- Provide a non-judgmental space for people who use your services
- Encourage families to reach out for social support
- Encourage families to build on their strengths
- Advocate for changes that will create equal opportunities for your clients, e.g., adequate supports, and social assistance rates

What can my community do to help young children develop resilience?

- Accept newcomers
- Show respect for and foster positive attitudes towards members of both sexes within a community
- Promote safe, equal access to recreation and other services in your geographical community
- Encourage children and families to get involved with activities outside of the family
- Befriend and be a safe mentor to young people in your community
- Praise children and make them feel valuable
- Offer all parents skill and confidence building activities and programs
- Provide opportunities for daily physical activity for children of all ages
- Support media that show healthy images and messages about children and families

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