



Help Build Resilience in Our Children

Using Positive Emotions to Build Resources and Resilience.

Resilience is an important issue for practitioners working with children. Often they are working with children who are struggling with layers of adversity, including experiences of trauma and abuse, loss of key attachment figures, poverty and educational under-achievement.

Two practitioners working for a small children's charity in London, that offers a counselling and therapy service to children and their families, have outlined the importance of positive emotions in promoting resilience. They linked research on positive emotions, particularly the 'broaden and build' theory to the work being done in a school-based therapy group called 'Mighty Me' – a 9-week program for primary aged children living with problem-saturated identities

and struggling with the effects of bereavement, bullying, and experiences of abuse. The practitioners highlighted the importance of taking this work outside the group context to build resilience within the wider community as well.

Through the use of play, art and a vivid imagination, the practitioners aimed to implement strategies that would promote feelings of personal power, serenity, cheerfulness and appreciation for others. They also aimed to create opportunities for children to problem solve by generating realistic goals and identifying internal and external resources.

KEY FINDINGS

- Three different kinds of coping enable individuals to generate and sustain positive affect in the context of chronic stress. Positive reappraisal (reframing a situation to see it in a positive light), goal directed problem focused coping (efforts directed at solving or managing a problem through identifying realistic goals, internal resources and small acts of mastery over the difficult situation)



and infusing ordinary events with positive meaning (identifying what people have done that has been helpful or which relates to something they give value to).

- Research with adults has found that those who experience positive emotions in the midst of bereavement are more likely to develop long terms plans and goals and more likely to find positive meaning in their distress.
- When we play we relate to others and build social bonds. When we push our limits and explore the world around us we not only enhance our sense of personal power, we also gather new information about our environment. All of these help us deal with adversity.
- A key ingredient in the 'Mighty Me' program was naming and externalising a problem. With one child acting out the relevant problem (temper, shyness, sadness) and another acting the role of a TV interviewer (with other kids the TV audience), the child is able to separate themselves and consequently have some influence over the problem. A fun situation gives a child the chance to talk about things they often find hard to talk about and undo the associated negative arousal that thinking about the problem directly generates.

- A weekly 'Mighty Me' check-in provided children with an opportunity to share with one another ways in which they have been mighty throughout the week and also share small acts of joy and kindness, giving positive meaning to ordinary events and encouraging children to practise naming feelings.
- The writing of a letter to significant others (parents, siblings, best friends, teachers, grandparents) asking them to notice specific ways of being they would like to engage in, was found to be an enjoyable and creative activity for the children.
- Repeated encouragement by significant others increased the likelihood children will engage in more positive behaviours and ways of thinking.
- A 'Graffiti Wall' and a booklet on 'how to make problems smaller' were ways in which the children shared strategies to cope with difficult situations with other children outside the group.

Source: J. Hutchinson & V. Pretelt (2010). , *Building resources and resilience: Why we should think about positive emotions when working with children, their families and their school. Counselling Psychology Review*, 25, 20-27.

THINGS YOU CAN DO

- ✓ An A-Z of feelings is a great way for kids to develop a language that expresses their emotions and feelings. Source one on the internet, print it out and ask your child to illustrate words with appropriate faces (sad, hurt, happy, angry).
- ✓ Watch for signs of fear and anxiety in kids. Bed wetting, nail biting, stomach or headache, or withdrawing and wanting to be alone, may be signs that your child is being teased, bullied, or just not coping at school.
- ✓ Communicate with teachers if you feel a problem has arisen at school. Provide additional one-on-one time at home to encourage conversation.
- ✓ Help kids to put adversity into perspective. The Catastrophe Scale is a great strategy for kids. The problem is placed on a scale of 1-10 and the child can then decide if the catastrophe of the lost pencil is as bad as being late for school.
- ✓ Emphasise safety, routines and reassurance when kids are faced with anxiety or problems that seem to be out of their control.
- ✓ Role model positive thinking. "Yes, it's hard, but I know you'll give it your best shot"; "OK, let's look at this another way..."; "If we work at this together, I reckon we'll find a solution"; "It didn't work out the way you wanted, but that's OK, not everything works first time."
- ✓ Where appropriate, add the element of fun to working through a problem.
- ✓ Where possible include the family in a community volunteer activity, like a fun run for charity, or a clean up the community day. Encourage your kids to give the toys and clothes they no longer need to the local op shop.
- ✓ Encourage 'gratitude' not 'attitude' when they can't have what they want. Talk about delaying gratification, saving for a toy, and making the most of the situation they find themselves in.
- ✓ Parental positive affirmation and recognition of effort helps kids develop confidence in their ability to put adversity behind them and move forward.

TAKEAWAY

FROM PROFESSOR MICHAEL BERNARD
FOUNDER, YOU CAN DO IT! EDUCATION

Resilience is key to coping with adversity. We all need the ability to bounce back and put things into perspective. As parents, we can focus not only on language and activities that promote positive development and resilience, but also create opportunities where our kids' parents, teachers and friends can do so as well. Resilience involves behaviours, thoughts and actions that can be learned over time. When our kids experience the power of positive emotions, the community they move in has the opportunity to do so as well.