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Parenting Resilient Children at Home and at School



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Have you ever wondered why some people are particularly good at dealing with ups and downs and seem to go through life with a positive attitude?

There are many reasons why people approach life the way they do, but those who are good at coping with challenges have something in common: resiliency.

Resiliency is not one specific thing, but a combination of skills and positive attributes that people gain from their life experiences and relationships. These attributes help them solve problems, cope with challenges and bounce back from disappointments.



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Obviously, resiliency is something we want our children to develop and maintain. In life, things go wrong and we sometimes experience big changes. Being able to deal with those setbacks and transitions is a key factor in positive mental health, as well as school, career and relationship success.

Resiliency is not something parents can control or determine, but we do play an important role in helping our children develop the attributes – or assets, as we are going to call them – that enable them to be resilient.

This booklet is designed to help you understand what resiliency is, how it develops and what parents can do help build resiliency in children. We will concentrate on the middle years of childhood (ages 6 through 12) because they are between the early childhood and the adolescent stages that get so much attention. It’s also the age when children’s school behaviour and learning patterns become established.

The idea is not to give you something else to do or to worry about. In fact, as you read you’ll probably learn that you are already using some parenting practices that build resiliency. We hope you’ll also find some new ideas to incorporate into your family’s day-to-day life.

Understanding Resiliency

A resilient object can stand up to tough use and spring back to its original shape, like a willow branch, for example. That's not a bad place to start when talking about resiliency in children. However, people are much more complex than objects.

Personal resiliency is about our assets – the resources, attributes and skills that help us recover from negative events or feelings, cope with challenges and adversity, and look after ourselves when things aren't going well.



Karin, aged 15, just had a big fight with her boyfriend. "That's the end of that relationship," she thinks. "I'm sure he hates me now." She cries a little bit. Then she stops, telling herself, "If I keep thinking like this I'll just be miserable."

She calls home and tells her dad.

"I'm sorry to hear about that, sweetie," he says. "These things happen. Your mother and I have had a couple of pretty bad fights. Sometimes the best thing to do is just give it time. These things sometimes don't seem so bad the next day."

Karin feels a little better. She calls her friend Sarah. "I just had a huge fight with Chad. I've got to get my mind off it. Can we hang out tonight?" she asks.

"Sure," says Sarah. "I'll meet you at Starbucks at 7:30."

Karin is making good use of her resiliency assets. Even though she will feel bad for a while, she has done some things to help herself. She has reached out to her parents and a friend, people who will support her and help her feel better. She also has some skills that help her think about her relationship problem in a positive, productive way. That gives her a better chance of finding a solution.



Resiliency in Children

One way to think about resiliency and how it develops in children, is to break it into four main sets of assets and abilities.

- 1. Relationships and reaching out:** a sense of belonging, having people who can be there for us and knowing how to reach out to them.
- 2. Emotional skills:** the ability to deal with emotions so they don't overwhelm us.
- 3. Competence:** skills and thinking abilities that enable us to solve problems and influence what happens in our lives.
- 4. Optimism:** a positive and hopeful attitude.

Relationships and Reaching Out Skills

Experts have different theories and terms for talking about resiliency, but one point is unanimous among them: *the single most important factor in child resiliency is relationships.*

Supportive relationships contribute to resiliency throughout life. For children, it's more basic than that. Most of the resiliency they have, and their ability to develop other resiliency assets, is dependent on relationships, particularly relationships with parents or parent figures.



Sam, aged 10, is struggling with his math homework. "Dad, I'll never get this homework done. There are too many questions," he says, near tears.

"Oh yeah?" says his father. "Let me have a look." He looks at Sam's math book. "Ten questions. Do you think you could get five done before supper?"

"Maybe," says Sam.

"Try that. Then you'll be half done. You'll get a break over supper time and then there will be only five more to do."

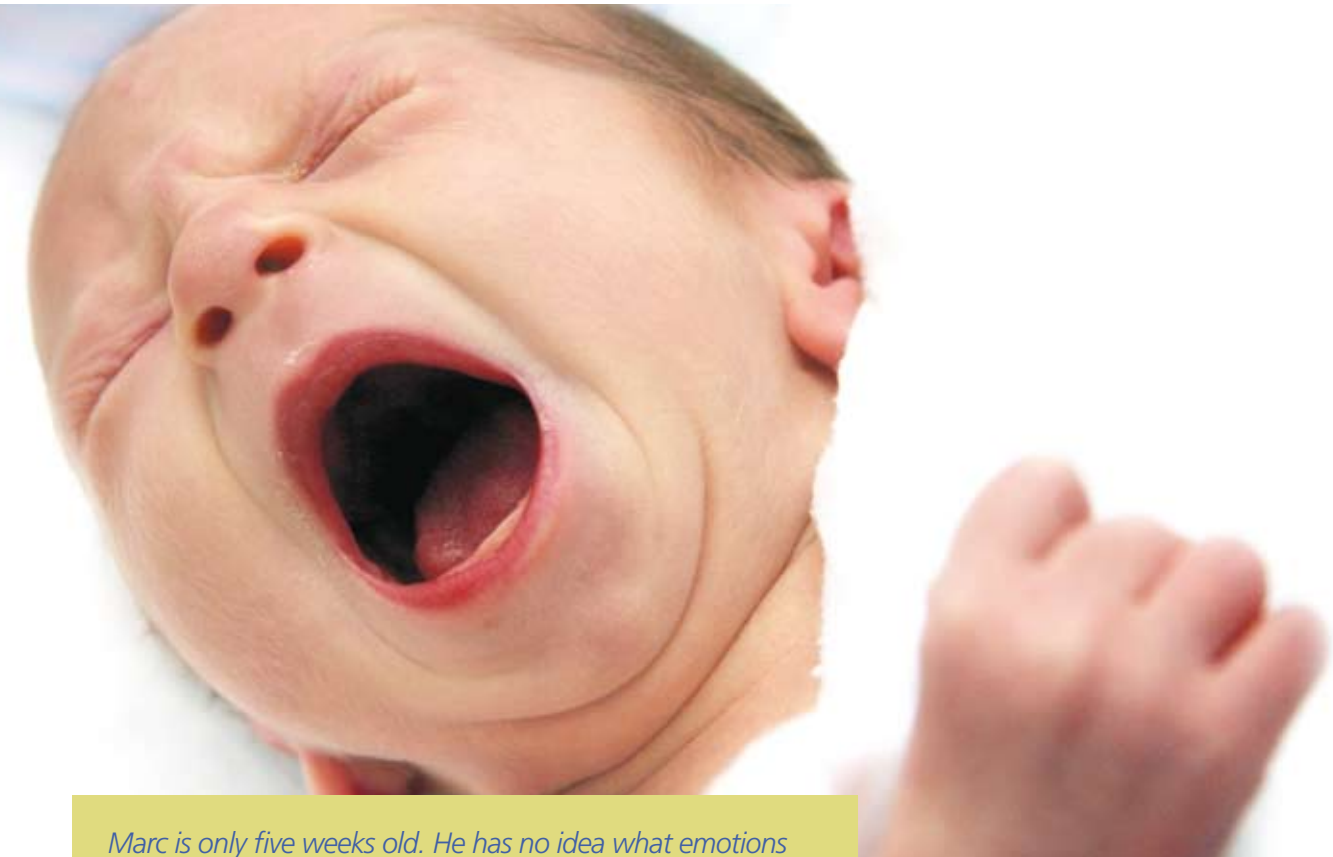
Sam is lucky that his father is there to offer this kind of support. Without it, he may not have been able to finish his assignment, or homework could have become such a bad experience that Sam might start feeling negative about school.

Parent-child relationships are the model for all other relationships. But relationships with brothers, sisters, grandparents, uncles, aunts, friends, teachers, coaches and neighbours can also help children become resilient.

Relationship and Reaching Out Assets

- strong parent-child relationships
- social skills and self-confidence
- the ability to ask for help
- understanding of personal boundaries (your own and those of others)
- belonging to communities and groups

Emotional Skills



Marc is only five weeks old. He has no idea what emotions are, but when he cries he puts his whole body into it. He clenches his arms, his fingers close into fists, he pulls up his little legs and just wails his heart out. He has no way of knowing how or when he will feel better.

This is how we start. Babies have no ability to understand or deal with feelings. They are totally dependent on their caregivers for comfort and help handling their strong emotions. The experience of being comforted over and over again will teach Marc that people recover from bad feelings. Eventually, with the support of parents and other people, Marc will learn to comfort himself, get his mind off of bad feelings, understand and respond to other people's emotions and even control his feelings for short periods of time.

We can't control our feelings completely, but if we are frequently overwhelmed by emotions, we have to put all of our energy into trying to cope with them. That makes it more difficult to get over bad feelings or make good decisions in challenging situations. That's why emotional skills are a key part of resiliency.

Emotional Skills Assets

- positive self-esteem
- ability to calm oneself
- ability to talk about feelings
- sense of humour
- ability to distract oneself
- ability to see the hopeful side of problems and challenges
- knowing how to act appropriately in various situations

Competence

Sometimes we feel like we can *make things happen* in our lives. Other times, it seems like *things happen* to us and are beyond our control. Resilient people feel a greater sense of control over their lives because they understand their own competence. Their knowledge and skills enable them to set realistic goals and develop strategies to accomplish them.

Babies and toddlers start out thinking that things happen as if by magic. But as they grow they learn, bit by bit, that things happen for a reason and that they can make things happen.

When one-year-old Kyla drops food from her high chair, the dog comes over and eats it. That's pretty interesting, so she does it again. And again.

•
Six-year-old Jamal goes outside to play hockey in the driveway without mittens. He comes in with cold, red hands. "My hands are freezing!" he complains.

His father teases him. "Hmm... I can think of way to keep my hands warm in winter. Can you?"

Jamal laughs. "Dad! I know. Mittens!"

"Think about that next time," says his dad.

•
Nine-year-old Maddie wants to ask if she can rent a movie. She sees that her mom is in a bad mood, so she decides to wait and ask later. She's learned that her mom often says "no" when she's in a bad mood.

•
Twelve-year-old Manuel wants to fry an egg. He doesn't grease the pan, so the egg sticks and breaks into pieces when he tries to flip it. "How do you flip an egg without wrecking it?" he asks his mother.

"Put a little butter in the pan first. That keeps the egg from sticking," she tells him.

Children are learning about cause and effect all the time: at play, at school, as they pursue interests and hobbies, and from their parents' guidance and positive discipline. All of these experiences become part of the developing competence that helps children in all cultures feel that they have some control over their lives.



Competence Assets

- goal setting and planning
- problem solving and reasoning skills
- practical skills, like being able to cook, clean, budget, fix things and find information
- the ability to look after oneself and be independent
- assertiveness
- perseverance
- good judgement and critical thinking skills

Optimism

It seems obvious that a positive outlook on life is an important part of resiliency. And, sure enough, research has shown that optimists are happier than pessimists. However, there's a difference between healthy optimism and a mindlessly positive attitude. Healthy optimism is realistic. It's not based only on beliefs, but also on knowledge, experience and a clear understanding of one's skills and capabilities.



Maura and Anna both got cut from the rep soccer team. Anna thinks to herself, "I'm not fast enough. And that coach hates me."

Meanwhile, Maura is thinking, "I'm about as good as some of those other girls, but I'm a little smaller. I'll keep practising and if I grow a bit, I can probably make the team next year."

Optimism Assets

- confidence in one's skills and abilities
- ability to judge risks
- positive childhood experiences
- supportive family and community
- being generous and supportive of others

Maura, who is thinking like an optimist, sees being cut as a survivable, temporary setback, while pessimistic Anna sees it as a defeat that she can do nothing about.

Most of us are optimistic and pessimistic at various times. So are children. An important part of developing resilient children is to help them learn the skill of optimistic thinking.

Gender Differences

Girls and boys may develop and display resiliency in different ways. For example, boys tend to be less interested than girls in talking about feelings. A boy's response to being upset is often physical, while girls generally learn to talk about feelings earlier than boys. On the other hand, because boys get the message that "boys don't cry," they often learn to control some feelings before girls do. Girls may develop certain kinds of judgement and competence (such as being able to sit still and pay attention) earlier than boys, while boys often learn physical skills more quickly. There can be other differences as well. The important thing is to not expect the exact same resiliency development in boys and girls.

It All Goes Together

We've talked about four different components of resiliency, but they are not separate little compartments. For example, competence, or having a sense of control over our destiny, is part of what helps us be optimistic. Both optimism and the ability to reach out to supportive people help us manage our emotions. Good emotional skills help us maintain our relationships. These are just some of the ways that the four components of resiliency work together to help people live happy and productive lives.

How Resiliency Develops in Children

The Six- to Eight-Year-Old				The Nine-
	Ready To	Need Help With	6–8 Snapshot	Ready To
Relationships and Reaching Out	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> develop more independent relationships with grandparents, relatives, teachers and children their own age 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> getting along with others understanding other people's behaviour and feelings taking steps towards independence while still feeling dependent at times 	<p>Children in this age group are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> very imaginative and into pretend/fantasy play eager to learn new skills still easily upset and need lots of comforting tend to be naturally optimistic and forget bad feelings quickly still fairly dependent on parents able to enjoy activities and friends with great enthusiasm able to control impulses sometimes, but not consistently still in need of simple explanations starting to be able to see another person's point of view, but are still fairly self-centred 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> understand and care more about the feelings of others treat people with respect and use good manners start getting support from peers
Emotional Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> talk more about their feelings benefit from hearing parents use words to describe feelings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> managing strong feelings finding the right words to express their feelings 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> learn simple strategies to calm down or get their minds off of bad feelings (e.g. switching activities to distract themselves or being by themselves until they feel better)
Competence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> learn basic skills that give children a sense of accomplishment: reading, writing, climbing, skating, swimming, riding a bicycle, preparing food benefit from involvement in lessons, sports or other organized activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> learning how to behave away from home controlling impulses paying attention and sitting still for longer periods of time 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> pay attention and control behaviour for longer periods take on more household chores and responsibilities think about how their behaviour impacts future situations and events
Optimism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> notice and learn from adult examples of optimistic thinking and behaviour be shown optimistic ways to think about situations and experiences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> feeling reassured by secure, loving relationships with parents and caregivers 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> start learning to judge and understand experiences, situations and possibilities in a more realistic way (Younger children can be overly optimistic.)

As noted in the last chapter, children start life with one main resiliency asset: their parents and caregivers. During childhood, the responsibility for resiliency gradually shifts from parent to child as kids start to build their own assets.

In this chapter, we'll look at children's development in stages, focusing on how resiliency develops and what parents can do at each stage

to help them build their assets in the four different areas: relationships and reaching out, emotional skills, competence and optimistic thinking.

Please note that information about child development should always be taken as a general guideline. Every child develops on his or her own schedule and a broad range of behaviour can fall within the boundaries of "normal."

to Ten-Year-Old

The Eleven- to Twelve-Year-Old

Need Help With

- dealing with their expanding and more demanding social world
- treating other adults with respect, while still being assertive

- bad feelings, which can sometimes be harder to get over at this age
- understanding other people's emotions
- talking about feelings and emotional experiences

- being realistic
- following through with things they have to do (like chores and homework)
- dealing with disappointment as they learn they aren't "awesome" at everything they try

- seeing the hopeful side of negative situations
- finding alternatives to some of their negative thoughts

9–10 Snapshot

- Children in this age group are:
- much more conscious of comparing themselves (and their abilities) to other children
 - more influenced by peers
 - a little more able to control anger and other feelings
 - developing more independence, can feel OK about being away from parents for longer periods of time
 - less naturally optimistic, more likely to hold onto bad feelings for longer periods of time
 - able to participate in and enjoy group activities
 - still highly influenced by parents' ideas because they have not yet reached the age of preteen and teen rebellion

Ready To

- look beyond their parents – particularly to friends – for more of their supportive relationships
- learn more about how relationships work

- develop a deeper understanding of why they feel angry, sad or happy
- start using inner emotional strength to deal with feelings

- understand more clearly the connection between their own efforts or actions and the results (e.g. practice improves piano playing)
- learn how to set goals
- use their conscience (rather than fear of getting into trouble) to guide their actions more often

- be encouraged and shown how to think optimistically
- have their negative statements and thoughts gently challenged

Need Help With

- learning to challenge authority respectfully
- staying connected to parents, because they spend less time with parents at this age

- dealing with strong feelings that can be heightened by puberty and a growing desire to be independent
- dealing with the ups and downs of preteen social life

- realistic planning
- perseverance (eg. remembering and sticking with homework)
- learning how to be responsibly independent (e.g. telling parents where they are)

- developing more positive ways of thinking
- learning how to see the positive or hopeful sides of situations they see as negative

11–12 Snapshot

- Children in this age group are:
- more influenced by peer pressure
 - very involved with electronic social networking (instant messaging, Facebook, etc.)
 - starting to question parents and become more opinionated
 - developing more of an inner "picture" of who they are
 - wanting to be more independent
 - experiencing feelings in a less child-like and more adult-like way
 - able to think more about the future and past
 - starting to be able to use their memories of emotional experiences to understand that bad feelings are temporary

Different Temperaments, Different Paths to Resiliency

All children are born with a set of temperament traits which affect the way their personalities develop. Research has shown that children's temperament traits tend to be fairly stable. A child who is very outgoing and loves to explore at age two, will probably be like that at age 6, 12, 18 and even 28. Temperament is not something we can change; it's something we need to understand and work with in our children to help them reach their full potential.

A child's temperament traits will affect the way he develops resiliency assets. Temperament differences also help explain why certain children develop these assets more or less easily than others.

Research has identified nine temperament traits, along with their challenges and advantages. Here's a quick explanation of them and how they may affect children's development of resiliency.

1. Activity Level

Some children are, by nature, more or less active than others.

High activity

Kids with a high activity level may be more likely to get into "trouble," take longer to learn self-control, and need closer supervision and limits. On the upside, they may approach activities with gusto and be very good at physical challenges.

Low activity

Children with low activity levels may be easier to supervise and often learn to control their behaviour earlier than high activity kids. On the other hand, it may be difficult to interest them in activities and they may not get enough physical activity.

2. Distraction

Some children have a harder time paying attention and concentrating, while others are less easily distracted.

High distraction

Children who are easy to distract have a harder time learning to pay attention, follow instructions and get school work done. They need more support, reminders and supervision when doing homework. However, it is easy to get them interested in new activities and distract them from bad feelings.

Low distraction

These kids may learn more easily because of their ability to concentrate and pay attention. They also tend to need less supervision and reminders to complete tasks. On the other hand, they may become overly focused on certain tasks or activities and it may take more effort to get their attention.

3. Intensity

Some children react and express feelings very strongly and need more attention and emotional support from adults.

High intensity

Intense kids' emotional behaviour may be challenging and it takes them longer to develop emotional skills. However, intense kids need us more, which can help us connect with them.

Low intensity

Less intense children are usually easy to manage. They let go of anger more quickly and learn emotional skills more easily. On the other hand, their feelings may be harder to read at times.

4. Regularity

Some kids are very predictable with respect to things like sleeping, eating and toileting, while others have a less regular internal schedule.

High regularity

Very “regular” children like routines and are usually less challenging, however, they can be more easily upset by changes in routine.

Less regularity

These children are less predictable and harder to establish routines with, although they depend on these routines. On the plus side, they are often more adaptable and less likely to be upset by changes in routine.

5. Approach/Withdrawal

Some kids like to explore and try new things, while others are more inhibited and cautious about new situations and people.

High approach

These kids are naturally curious, love to explore and are open to new ideas and people. However, they usually require close supervision and limits because they don't have natural boundaries.

High withdrawal

These children are naturally cautious. They don't often get into things, and need less supervision. On the downside, it may be harder to get them to try new things and meet new people.

6. Sensitivity

Some children experience their senses more strongly than others and are more sensitive to sounds, textures, flavours and physical discomforts.

High sensitivity

Sensitive kids may have less emotional control and can be overwhelmed by sensations like strong smells, loud sounds, or even the tags in their clothes. On the plus side, they often have a strong awareness of what is going on around them.

Less sensitivity

These children are less likely to experience sensory overload and tend to adapt to new situations more easily. Less sensitivity has no real downside, although these kids may enjoy sensory experiences less intensely.

7. Adaptability

Children differ in their ability to adapt to changes and new situations.

High adaptability

Adaptable children have a natural kind of resilience because they are less affected by changes and adjust to new situations well.

Less adaptability

These kids can be very challenging because changes and new situations can be stressful for them, and it takes them longer to get used to new groups of people (e.g. school, group activities). However, they can be easy to connect with because they often come to parents for support.

8. Persistence

This refers to the degree to which children show determination and stick with difficult tasks.

High persistence

Persistent kids don't give up quickly when facing challenges, however, sometimes they persist too much – with misbehaviour, questions and requests for things they've been told they can't have.

Low persistence

It can be easier to manage the behaviour of low persistence kids because they'll more readily stop doing things we don't want them to do. On the downside, they find it harder to stick with challenging tasks.

9. Mood (positive or negative)

Research has shown that some people are more optimistic by nature and more often in a good mood than others.

Positive mood

Children with a positive mood are generally easygoing and feel content with life more often.

Negative mood

People who are predisposed to negative moods are at higher risk of depression and find it more difficult to learn optimistic thinking.

The main point of this introduction to temperament is to show that children develop their resiliency assets in different ways, and that individual children need different kinds of support and guidance from parents. There is nothing wrong with kids who have a harder time developing resiliency assets; their temperament is part of who they are. Our job as parents is to understand our children's unique strengths and weaknesses and use that understanding to give them the support and guidance that is right for them.

How Parents Build Resiliency in Children

Parents cannot give their children resiliency, but parenting does have a major impact on resiliency in five different areas:


- the parent-child relationship;
- parent-child communication;
- discipline;
- optimistic thinking;
- dealing with stress.

Supporting Resiliency Through Strong Relationships

If you take just one idea from this booklet, let it be that working to maintain a positive relationship with your children is the most important way to contribute to their resiliency.

Ben's ability to listen to, trust and take comfort from his father's words is rooted in their solid relationship. Zev rocked Ben as a baby, changed his diapers, read him stories and taught him to ride a bicycle. Along with any guidance or discipline Zev and his partner provided to Ben when he was little, they also gave him lots of affection, comfort, forgiveness, enjoyment and all the other kinds of parental warmth that made him feel cared for, secure and trusting. Ben's warm relationship with his parents is the foundation of his resiliency, and it will continue to be important as he bounces back from this major setback and learns to adapt to life with diabetes.

It's relatively easy to have close relationships with preschool children because they need us so much. Children over age six still need us a lot, but they do more things on their own. Over the next few years, they also develop a greater interest in friends, video games and other activities that draw them away from us. By age 11 or 12, they start to challenge our ideas and authority, so middle childhood is a period when we need to put more conscious effort into maintaining and strengthening our relationships with our children.



Ben, aged 12, has just learned he has Type 1 diabetes, a serious disease that will affect him for the rest of his life. He feels sick, upset and scared. He's lying on an emergency room bed, tears running down his face. His father, Zev, gropes for something to say to help Ben feel a tiny bit better. He looks his son in the eye and says, "I don't know much about diabetes, but I promise you one thing: you will feel normal again. I've met diabetics. They are happy people who do everything that other people do. It feels weird right now, but things will get better."



Here are some tips:

- Be aware of little opportunities to connect – during meals and car rides, by helping with homework, watching TV, or doing chores together.
- Schedule special time with individual children where the two of you do something you enjoy together. Relationships can't be built only around "special time," but it's one way to stay connected.
- Remember to enjoy your kids at all ages and stages. As children grow, we expect more of them and we become more critical. There's a danger of focusing only on their faults, or behaviours we'd like to see improve. It's important to notice children's good qualities, to find humour in the odd and funny things they do, and to show interest in the things that interest them.

Supporting Resiliency Through Good Communication

One way or another, almost everything we do as parents involves communicating with our kids. Here are some kinds of communication that help children become resilient.

Listen, Listen, Listen

We spend a lot of time telling our children things – what we want them to do, what we want them to stop doing, how to do things. But listening is just as important, if not more so.

Being able to express themselves and feel that people listen and understand them is an important part of children's developing sense of competence. We need to be ready to listen when kids are ready to talk, to give them our full attention, to have regular conversations about what's going on in their daily lives, and to ask children for their ideas and opinions in family discussions.

"What do you think we should have for supper tonight?" Lila asks her six-year-old son.

"Hot dogs and chocolate sundaes!" he says excitedly.

"Don't be silly," Lila says. "Hot dogs are not a dinner food. Can't you think of something more sensible?"

Perhaps the boy's suggestion wasn't the best, but this kind of response shows little respect for his ideas. A better way to respond would have been:

"You really like hot dogs, don't you? We could have ice cream for dessert, but I was thinking we should have something more nutritious for dinner. Would you rather have spaghetti or chicken with rice?"



Respect Their Feelings

One crucial emotional skill for children is the ability to talk about how they feel. Here's how parents can help:

- Allow children to express their feelings.
- Teach children the language of emotions by using feeling words like angry, sad, proud, embarrassed or frustrated.
- Try not to get upset when your children are upset.

"I hate Jason!" says nine-year-old Aisha, who is furious at her little brother.

"Oh, oh! Tell me what happened," says her father, David.

"That stupid idiot crumpled up some of the pictures for my school project," Aisha sobs.

"Wow, that's terrible. I can see why you're angry," replies David.

Jason walks by.

"Idiot! Stupid jerk!" shouts Aisha.

"I know you're upset, but you can't call your brother names," David says in a calm voice. "I'll talk to Jason about this, then I'll help you figure out what to do about your project. Later, when you're not so angry, I want you to tell Jason how angry you were and how much extra work you had to do because he crumpled your pictures."

Aisha is still upset, but she knows her father thinks her feelings are important. He's also teaching her how to handle herself when she's angry with someone. Aisha might still call her brother names in the future, but if she gets this kind of support and communication regularly, she will gradually learn to handle her anger in a more constructive way.

Respect Their Voice

Sometimes, especially when children are shy, parents get into the habit of speaking for them. For example, they may always order food for their child in a restaurant. Children may not always want to speak for themselves, but they should be encouraged to try. Being able to express themselves is part of their sense of mastery and control over what happens in their lives. Older children have a growing need to voice their views both at school and at home.

Encourage Respectful Assertiveness

An important part of resiliency is learning how to stand up for yourself and tell people what you want and need. The best way for children to learn to be assertive is at home, with parents who allow kids to say what they really think, to negotiate and even to challenge parents' ideas at times. But we also need to teach children how to be assertive in a respectful way.

Eleven-year-old Zach wants to go to an all-ages dance at the local arena.

"I'm not comfortable with that," says his father, Nick. "Older kids will be there. Some might be drinking or taking drugs. I don't think it's a good situation for someone your age."

"You're so stupid!" Zach snaps. "My friends can all go. You don't want me to have any fun. I have the worst parents in the world!"

"Hold on, buddy!" Nick says. "We can talk about this. Maybe we can work something out, maybe not. But I'm not even going to discuss it if you insult me like that. People are more willing to negotiate with someone who treats them with respect. Got it?"

Zach sighs and nods.

"If you want to go to events like this, I need to know more about the situation and what your plan is. I need to know you will be OK."

Raising children is a long-term process and it's important to keep in mind that some of the parenting strategies that promote resilience don't lead to immediate results. Sometimes, we all need tricks to get through the next five minutes, but the most important aspects of parenting may affect children very gradually. Try to celebrate baby steps of progress in your child's development. If you look back to a year ago, you'll probably realize that your child has come a long way.



Supporting Resiliency Through Positive Discipline

People have different beliefs about how to raise children, and children can turn out well in families that use various parenting approaches. But, one way or another, most parents are trying to find the right balance between control and freedom.

Adults need to control their children at times, because kids are still developing the ability to control themselves. But parenting based primarily on control usually lacks warmth and, with too many restrictions, children learn only how to obey (or how to not get caught misbehaving), rather than how to make good choices about their behaviour. The older children get, the more time they spend outside of adult supervision. As young adults, they will be in charge of their own lives and that requires self-discipline, which will enable them to think and act responsibly on their own.

"Tanya. Time to practice," says Suraya.

Tanya ignores her mother and continues watching TV.

"Tanya?"

No answer. Suraya goes to the living room and stands in front of the TV.

"Mom, I'm watching TV!" Tanya yells.

"I know," says Suraya. "And I need to know when you're going to practise. You haven't played the piano for two days and you won't have time after dinner because we are going out. When are you going to practise?"

Tanya sighs. "Can I do it after this show is over?"

"OK," says Suraya. "But I expect the TV to go off and the practising to begin as soon as the show is over. That's your part of the deal. If you can't stick to it, I'll be the one who decides when you practise next time."

Ten minutes later, Suraya hears the piano. When Tanya walks by after finishing, Suraya says, "Your playing sounded good. I could tell you were working hard."

For more information about positive discipline, read *Yes You Can! Positive discipline ideas for you and your child*. This booklet is available online at: http://www.psychologyfoundation.org/pdf/publications/yesYouCan_eng.pdf

The style of parenting that fosters self-discipline is called authoritative parenting, which sits between authoritarian control and permissiveness. Authoritative parents use positive discipline to help children learn and understand the impacts (both good and bad) of their behaviours, actions and choices. They set reasonable limits, tell and show what behaviour is expected (not just what kids shouldn't do) and use fair consequences, rather than harsh punishments. Authoritative parents also allow children some freedom, with guidance, and are willing to negotiate and consider their children's ideas and wishes.



Learning to Make Independent Decisions

There's a connection between authoritative parenting, self-discipline and resiliency. Being able to make responsible, independent decisions is a crucial part of the competence that builds children's resiliency. Children can only learn to make good decisions with lots and lots of practice. So it's important that we allow them to make choices, and even mistakes, that are appropriate for their age.

"Amanda, do you think that shirt and pants go together?" says Amanda's mom.

"Yes, I like pink and yellow," says the seven-year-old.

"It's very colourful," says her mother.

Amanda has picked a colour combination that her mom doesn't agree with. But even if her mom is right, going to school in mismatched clothes won't hurt Amanda. Making choices like this will help her learn how to make good decisions.

"Are you sure you want to spend all of your birthday money on a Sidney Crosby bobblehead doll? That thing will be broken in two weeks," Jordan's dad points out.

"Why not buy something that will last, like a CD or a T-shirt?"

"I think bobbleheads are cool. I want to start collecting them," Jordan replies.

The next day, Jordan might wish he'd spent his money differently, but making this decision is part of how he will learn to manage his money.

It can be hard to let children decide things for themselves and watch them make mistakes. But if we are always doing things for children and telling them exactly what to do, they won't get the experience that allows them to develop good judgment. Obviously, we have to protect children from serious mistakes that could harm them, but small mistakes and failures help children learn the connection between their behaviour and the results. It also helps prepare them for the teenage years, when the decision might be something like not getting into a car with a drunk driver.

Supporting Resiliency by Teaching Optimistic Thinking

Optimism is crucial for resiliency. It helps us approach our lives and our problems with a positive attitude. It also gives us faith and courage to persist in the face of challenges.

What is the difference between an optimist and a pessimist? Optimists generally see bad situations and feelings as temporary – things are tough right now, but they'll get better – and see the hopeful side of negative situations. An optimist would think, "I'm not very good at shooting baskets, but I'm a pretty good skater." A pessimist would generalize his shortcomings and think, "I'm terrible at sports." Lastly, optimists don't take failure personally and are less likely to blame or have negative thoughts about themselves when things go wrong.

Research has shown that some people are born with a more optimistic outlook than others. So, while we can't completely control our child's level of optimism, we can help children learn to think more optimistically. Very often, a person's thoughts are what keep negative feelings in place.

Here are three things parents can do:

1. Challenge Negative Thoughts (Gently)

"This has been the worst day of my life! I have to go to bed soon and not one good thing has happened today," says Jean-Marc.

"Yeah, you've had a hard day, but it wasn't all bad," Mom responds. "I remember you had a good time playing video games with Corey just before dinner. And you were in a good mood when you woke up. Let's think of something we can do tomorrow to make it a good day."

2. Show Children a More Positive View

Alanna wasn't picked to be Snow Queen at the ballet recital. She's very discouraged. "I'm a lousy dancer," she says.

"I know you really wanted that part, but only one person can be the Snow Queen," says her father. "There are a lot of good dancers in the class – it must be hard for the teacher to decide. You know, when I watch a performance, I watch all of the dancers. Every dancer has an important job to do to make the whole show look good."

3. Model Optimistic Thinking

Instead of saying, "I'm hopeless when it comes to figuring out computer problems," say something like, "I guess I'll have to go online and do some research to figure out how to solve this problem I'm having with Windows. Or maybe I could call my friend Ken. He knows a lot about computers."

These strategies don't necessarily work instantly and children won't always respond positively. But being regularly exposed to optimistic ways of looking at challenges helps kids learn, gradually, to think like optimists. The middle childhood years are a good time to start because children are losing some of the natural optimism of early childhood.

What Parents Can do to Help

- Make sure children get enough rest, a proper diet and exercise, and also that these basics are covered for yourself, so you can be the effective parent you would like to be and model positive self-care for your child.
- Listen and talk to children about how they feel and show acceptance for their feelings.
- Help children identify the problem that is causing the stress and understand how big the problem is.

Supporting Resiliency by Helping Children Deal with Stress

Another reason resiliency is so important is that it helps us deal with stress. Everyone experiences stress at times and being able to deal with it is a key part of mental health.

Not all stress is bad. A certain amount is normal. Stress becomes a problem when children experience very high, ongoing levels of stress, or when they don't get the support they need from adults to help them deal with it.

At times, it's easy to see that our children are stressed and what's causing it. Other times it's less obvious. Stress can sometimes cause children to be irritable, cry, become angry more easily than usual, or even to complain of tummy pains or headaches.

Fatma and Ram have noticed that their son, Safi, has not been himself for the last few days. Suddenly, he doesn't want to go to school and he has been acting very whiny for an eight-year-old. When they ask Safi if anything happened at school, all he says is, "I hate school."

"Maybe we should talk to the teacher," says Ram.

"Yes," agrees Fatma. "I also think we should try to spend more time with Safi and try to do a few more fun things with him. I think he needs us a little more right now."

"You're right," says Ram. "Do you think he's been getting enough sleep? He's been staying up a little late some nights."

- Assist your children in discovering activities or strategies that help them feel better when they are stressed.
- Ensure that children's lives are not too busy. Some need more 'down time' than others.
- Make sure children have time to play. Unstructured play and other enjoyable activities help children deal with their stress.
- Teach children to take slow, deep breaths in stressful moments.

It's not always easy to understand stress in a young child. But Ram and Fatma have the right idea. Hopefully they can work with the teacher to learn and deal with whatever is causing Safi's stress. In the meantime, Safi needs the basics: to get enough sleep and exercise, eat good meals, enjoy play and regular activities, and most of all, feel the comfort and love of his parents.

We should try to eliminate or minimize the most harmful kinds of stress, such as exposure to violence and abuse, including emotional abuse. But a parent's goal should not be to eliminate all sources of stress. In fact, an important part of developing resiliency for children is having the experience of getting parental help to deal with moderate stresses.

Six-year-olds can't deal with stress all by themselves; they depend on adults to recognize their stress and help them through it. Even 12-year-olds need help with this. Children whose parents help them manage stress learn two things. One is that stress doesn't have to last forever. The other is that we can help ourselves or sometimes get the help of others to deal with it. As children move into their teen and young adult years, those whose parents have shown them how to manage stress will start using the strategies they have learned.

Sources of Stress for Children

- Big changes in their lives – moving to a new home, starting school or daycare
- Ongoing conflict within the family
- Schedules that are too busy
- Problems with school work
- Social problems – being teased, bullied, feeling different or left out by peers, friends or teammates
- Feeling unliked or unloved by parents, family members or other caregivers

Resiliency in School

School experiences affect resiliency in two ways:

- The knowledge, thinking skills and academic abilities gained at school contribute to children's resiliency assets.
- School presents many challenges and how well we help kids deal with them is one of the ways they learn to cope with challenges in life.

People often assume that school success is all about how smart you are and how hard you try. Intelligence and effort are both important, but other less obvious factors have a major impact as well. Canadian psychologist Dr. Ester Cole has developed a model for thinking about the factors that contribute to children's success and resiliency at school.



Communication Skills

allow children to pay attention, understand information, ask questions and learn from others. Includes:

- basic English, French, or other native language skills
- speech, hearing and listening abilities
- non-verbal communication skills (reading facial expressions, body language, tone of voice)

School Social Skills

enable children to get along with others and feel comfortable at school. Includes:

- a sense of belonging at school
- willingness and ability to interact with peers and teachers
- ability to get along with others
- age appropriate emotional skills

Learning Skills

enable children to participate in and benefit from learning activities at school. Includes:

- academic ability (intelligences)
- motivation to work
- child's active participation in her own learning
- ability to concentrate and solve problems

School Self-Esteem

helps children want to succeed, feel able to succeed and feel comfortable at school. Includes:

- child's inner view of his own ability
- parents' support of school learning and activities
- support and encouragement the child gets from teachers



Maxime enjoys school. He loves his teacher and has lots of friends. However, Maxime has trouble sitting still, finds it hard to hold a pencil properly and is struggling with reading. His teacher worries that Maxime is falling behind.

Children's skills and strengths in these four areas are interrelated. They all work together to form their *school resiliency*: a set of behaviours and attributes that have a big impact on how effectively children are able to work and learn at school. It is just as important for parents to support children's non-academic skills as it is to make sure they study and do their homework.

Li is a very bright little girl. When she started kindergarten, she knew the alphabet, could read a few words and could find all the Canadian provinces on a map. But she is very shy in groups. Now in grade four, her grades are fine, but the teacher is concerned because Li doesn't seem happy at school. She has few friends and is starting to show less interest in her school work.

Li has the intelligence and thinking skills to do well at school. But in order to make the most of her ability, she will need support with the social and emotional skills that will enable her to feel more comfortable at school.

Extra support with reading, fine motor skills and learning to pay attention will help Maxime feel he can succeed at school. His teacher and parents need to exchange ideas about how to help Max in a way that does not harm his enjoyment of school. He may benefit from home activities like reading, drawing and arts and crafts.

A Parent's Role in Education

Parents can support and enhance children's learning in a number of ways:

- help children understand the value of education;
- ensure children come to school ready to learn each day: fed, rested, adequately dressed and as free of stress and worry as possible;
- find out what is expected of children at school;
- talk to children about school work and activities;
- help with homework;
- read with children at home and take them to the library;
- attend school interviews and activities;
- advocate for their child if necessary.

The most important way for parents to support children's education is through an effective home/school communication partnership. The teacher provides information about school activities and events, the child's progress and, if necessary, behaviour or school work problems. The parents' job is to take interest in their child's school work and school events, to ask questions and to provide information that helps the teacher understand their child. When there are problems, both parents and teacher work cooperatively and positively to share information, solve problems and support the child's learning.

Sometimes, when a child has a lot of learning or behaviour problems, parents become defensive because so many negative reports are coming home. There is also a danger of becoming so focused on problems that the student never hears anything positive about herself. Good parent-teacher teamwork makes it easier to recognize and support a child's positive qualities and successes. Even if those successes are relatively small, pointing them out helps the child to develop a positive sense of herself as a student and a positive attitude about school.

Building Learning Skills at Home

For young children, the core learning skills include being able to:

- pay attention;
- remember and think about what they are told or taught;
- make themselves do the work that is asked of them, even though it is not always the thing they would most like to do.

Building these abilities in grades one through six equips kids to develop the independent study skills they will need in secondary school. Much of this skill development takes place at school, of course, but some of it happens at home, largely through homework.

Homework shows parents what their children are learning at school and helps them discover what sort of learner their child is: what she enjoys, her strengths and weaknesses, and what helps her understand and remember ideas.

Parents have four main jobs with respect to homework:

1. To help children get organized.
2. To provide encouragement and help when needed (but not to do the homework for the child).
3. To teach kids to pace themselves and work on their own.
4. To talk to teachers about problems.

In grades one to three, children may not have much homework, so a parent's main job is to get a homework routine established. Set aside a regular time for homework (let your child help you decide on the time). Be available to help or answer questions if he needs it. Some parents like to "work" alongside their child: reading mail, paying bills, or answering e-mails on a laptop. A parent's presence sometimes helps young children concentrate and stay on task.

As children reach grade four and five, and a routine is in place, they should be able to work more independently. You may not have to be right there with them as often, but kids will still need you to be available for help and encouragement.

Homework Overload

If you think there is too much homework, or it's taking your child too long, talk to the teacher. It could be that a lot of students need more time to complete the work than the teacher expected. Or maybe it's just your child who is struggling. Either way it's useful for the teacher to know.

The best way to talk to teachers about homework issues is to share information. "I thought you should know it took Otis five hours to get that history project done." Or, "Sylvie worked on her story for an hour. I felt that was enough for one night, so even though she wasn't finished I let her stop." That allows the teacher to respond to information rather than a complaint.

Other Homework Helpers

Praise kids when they complete homework, but be sure to praise the effort as well.

When children's lives are too busy, you may need to cut back on outside activities or schedule your child's homework sessions carefully.

When kids are frustrated or tired, taking a short break is sometimes more helpful than trying harder.

Many schools now give each child an agenda to help students, parents and teachers keep track of assignments. Check your child's agenda every day. If there is never anything written in the agenda, check with the teacher. It may be that your child isn't writing instructions down.

"There is no way I can get all this work done in two nights!" says eleven-year-old Hannah. She has been involved in a community theatre production and let some homework and school projects pile up. Now she is in a panic.

Hannah's mother is feeling stressed as well. She doesn't like seeing her daughter so upset. "I knew this would happen," she thinks to herself. "I told her she was falling behind." She resists the urge to say "I told you so," and decides not to suggest solutions to Hannah right away. She knows that Hannah is seldom receptive to ideas when she is this upset.

Mom takes a deep breath. "You're really upset right now and it's hard to think," she says. "Maybe you need a break. Let's walk the dog around the block. It will only take a few minutes and I'll help you figure out what you can get done tonight."

After the walk, they sit down at the kitchen table and make a list of Hannah's assignments. "I suggest you start with something that isn't too hard," says Mom.

"Well, reading a chapter of my novel is fairly easy," says Hannah.

"Good," says her mom. "Finishing that will help you feel like you've made some progress. What's another thing you could get done tonight?"

"My geography project is almost finished," Hannah suggests.

"OK, so finish that tonight after your reading," says Mom.

A little while later, her mom checks in with Hannah. "How is it going?"

"The reading didn't take as long as I thought," Hannah replies. "I'm going to work on the math questions now. I'd rather just get it done."



Kids Need Different Kinds of Help and Support at Different Times

The Perfectionist

The perfectionist child needs help to set realistic goals and not take on too much.

Twelve year-old Sam does very well in school, but he expects so much of himself that he gets very stressed. Tonight he's illustrating a story. "I'll never get this right!" he says, crumpling up his paper and hurling it across the room.

His father, Jamal, knows that Sam sometimes gets frustrated because he tries to do more work than he needs to. "What are you working on?" he asks.

"My story," says Sam. "I have six more pictures to draw and it's taking forever." He fights back tears.

Jamal waits until Sam has calmed down a bit. "You seem to be spending more time drawing than writing. I wonder if that's what the teacher meant for you to do. Maybe you don't need ten pictures."

"But the teacher said to illustrate all parts of the story!" Sam insists.

"How about this?" says Jamal. "You have a great story and you have four good pictures. I think one more picture would be fine. You've worked hard and your teacher will be able to see that. If I'm wrong, OK, it's my fault. You can draw more pictures the next time."

The Easily Distracted Child

Distractable children need supervision to stay on task and may need work broken into chunks. In some cases, parents might need to negotiate a reduced workload (for example, five math questions well done, instead of ten poorly done).

Homework is a struggle for nine-year-old Tori. Some nights she can sit there for fifteen minutes without getting anything done.

"How are you doing?" her mother asks. "Not getting much done, I see. Try this: you have six more math questions. I want to see you do two of them. Then I'll show you this funny Youtube video I found. Then you can go back and do a few more."

Mom sits down at the table across from Tori. She drinks a cup of tea and reads a book. After a minute, she sees Tori staring off into space. "Tori, remember what you're here for. Let's see if you can do two questions in ten minutes."

"Ten minutes?" Tori says. "It's not going to take that long!"

"How long do you think it will take?" asks Mom.

"Five minutes," Tori replies.

"OK, show me," says Mom. Tori looks at the clock, then gets to work.





Seven-year-old Antoine is having a harder time with reading than the other kids in his class. "Keep reading to him and with him at home," the teacher suggests. "It takes some kids longer to learn to read than others and it helps if they are read to a lot."

Antoine and his dad are looking at a book for young readers about the Harry Potter movie. Dad says, "How about you read one sentence, then I'll read two. We'll take turns."

It's hard, but Antoine manages to read some sentences. After ten minutes Dad sees that Antoine is getting tired. "OK," Dad says. "You did some good reading and you're getting a little better each time. Let me read for a while. Then we'll take turns for a few more sentences and that will be enough for tonight."

The Child Who Struggles With School

A child who struggles needs help setting learning goals that are suited to his abilities and may need parents to review things he learned to help him remember.

When to Seek Outside Help or Tutoring

Many children go through periods where they struggle with their school work or are not happy at school. When problems last a long time, it's a good idea to seek outside help from a psychologist, counsellor or tutor. There is no perfect time to do this, in fact, the right time is whenever you are very worried or feeling lost about how to help your child. Here are two things to keep in mind:

- Start by talking to the teacher or principal. They can tell you what they are seeing at school. They may also suggest strategies to try at home or tell you about academic support, tutoring or counselling available through the school system.
- Don't wait for a crisis to ask for help. Extra help often takes time to set up.



Resiliency for Parents

Monique, a single mom, was having one of those days. Her kids were sick, so she had to stay home and miss an important meeting at work. Then she learned that her car needed \$1500 worth of repairs.

"Mom," her daughter Angela calls from the bedroom. "Can you bring me a drink and a cold wash cloth?"

"You're not the only one who's not feeling well you know!" Monique snaps. "Oh my gosh," she thinks immediately. "I can't believe I spoke to my sick child that way." She stops, takes a few deep breaths, then goes into Angela's room. "Honey, I'm so sorry I talked to you like that. I'm having a hard day." She puts a cold cloth on Angela's forehead and says, "Can I lie down with you for a few minutes?" Cuddling with her daughter reminds Monique of when Angela was a baby. She starts to relax.



Resiliency is important for parents too. Our resiliency helps children in two ways. First, like Monique, parents can't be at their best every day. When things aren't going well, your resiliency assets help you get back to being the parent you'd like to be more quickly. Secondly, one of the ways children learn how to be resilient is from the model their parents provide, which is as important as any guidance or teaching we give them.

How does parent resiliency work? Think back to the four areas of childhood resilience: supportive relationships, emotional skills, competence and optimistic thinking.

Relationships

Parents can rely on relationships with friends and loved ones for:

- emotional support;
- sharing the ups and downs of family life;
- help and advice;
- good times that help us enjoy being parents.

Emotional skills

We can use our experience, knowledge and understanding of emotions to:

- control our anger, frustration and alarm when we need to;
- calm ourselves and help ourselves feel better;
- remind ourselves that bad feelings are temporary;
- avoid making bad decisions when we are upset.

Competence

We can use our thinking ability and various life skills we've developed to:

- understand and solve problems;
- find information and answers to our questions about parenting;
- control the parts of our lives that we can control;
- learn to live with and adapt to the things we can't control.

Optimism

Optimistic thinking can help us:

- see the rays of hope in difficult situations;
- find ways to help ourselves when faced with parenting challenges;
- make the most of our good times.



Resiliency Boosters for Parents

Adults can increase their parenting resiliency in two practical ways. One is by not being afraid to ask for help. That could include professional help, but really, informal help may be even more important because we use it more often. No other society has ever assumed that all the responsibility for raising children would fall on the shoulders of one or two people. Traditionally, relatives, friends and neighbours have always assisted parents with child-rearing. We all parent better with the help of others.

Another way to boost your parenting resiliency is to learn more about raising children. Learning about child development will help you understand and parent your kids through various ages and stages. Parenting courses are another good resource because they can help you increase the number of strategies in your parenting "tool kit." These courses are not for "bad" parents, they are for all parents who want to boost their parenting skills. One of the biggest benefits of taking a parenting course is discovering that you are not alone and that other parents struggle with the same kinds of issues that you face. That takes some of the pressure off and helps people feel better about themselves as parents.

Parenting for Life Presents:

Kids Can Cope: Parenting resilient children at home and school

Kids Can Cope is the sixth in a series of booklets from the **Parenting for Life** education program. **Parenting for Life (PFL)** is an award-winning, non-profit, education program promoting positive parenting skills and the well-being of families. This unique initiative includes booklets and posters prepared by Canada's top parenting writers in collaboration with The Psychology Foundation of Canada.

Kids Can Cope is based on a concept developed by Dr. Ester Cole, Chair of PFL. The booklet was written by John Hoffman, a regular contributor to *Today's Parent* magazine, incorporating ideas and materials contributed by Dr. Cole, and PFL committee members Dr. Robin Alter, Dr. Karen Katchen, Dr. Maria Kokai, Wanda Matuszkiewicz, Bonnie Mok, Suzanne Park and Kerri Richards.

Additional Resources available from **Parenting for Life**:

- *Yes, You Can! Positive Discipline Ideas for You and Your Child*
- *Hands-on Dad: A Guide for New Fathers*
- *Let's Play! A Child's Road to Learning*
- *You and Your Preteen: Getting Ready for Independence*
- *Focus on Self-Esteem: Nurturing Your School-age child.*

For more information about **Parenting for Life** please contact the Psychology Foundation: Email: info@psychologyfoundation.org

Visit our website at www.psychologyfoundation.org to view our **Parenting for Life** material, order booklets or posters and learn about various programs and events offered by the Psychology Foundation of Canada.

The Psychology Foundation of Canada and Desjardins Financial Security are pleased to partner to bring you the information in this booklet.

The Psychology Foundation of Canada

The Psychology Foundation of Canada (PFC) is a national registered charity that supports parents and strengthens families through a number of initiatives including creating educational resources, developing training programs for professionals, and delivering community-based education. Founded in 1974 to promote the understanding and use of sound psychological knowledge to better people's lives, the Foundation is guided by a Board of Trustees comprised of psychologists and business and community leaders. PFC's programs, like *Kids Have Stress Too!*[®], *Parenting for Life and Diversity in Action*, help Canadians better understand how to manage situations and relationships more effectively at home, school, community and work. To find out more, or to order materials, please visit PFC's Web sites at www.psychologyfoundation.org or www.kidshavestresstoo.org.

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09352E (10-02)