

Solutions Newsletter

March 2021



Effective School
Solutions

Solutions is a newsletter published by ESS for parents, guardians and caretakers. Each issue highlights an important topic related to children's mental health and provides practical applications for parents in the home environment.

From Survival to Resilience

March 2021 will mark the somber one-year anniversary of life under quarantine. In addition to the staggering number of deaths, the pandemic has taken its toll on the health, finances, social connections, and occupational/educational functioning of American children and adults. Health organizations are reporting alarming statistics that reflect increased levels of stress and mental health symptoms across the population of the United States.

But March 2021 also signals the beginning of spring, a season of hope and renewal. With the increasing availability of vaccines and treatments, Americans are beginning to imagine a life beyond the pandemic, and perhaps can begin to shift from a stance of survival to one of resilience.

What is resilience and how do we foster it in our children and ourselves? Some view resilience as a fixed and stable trait, that is, a person's ability to "bounce back". But the model adopted by the American Psychological Association in 2017 defines resilience as a developmental "process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or significant sources of stress ... that involves behaviors, thoughts and actions that can be learned and developed in anyone." In other words, although some individuals are more vulnerable to stress because of neurological or biological factors, resilience skills are highly teachable, and can help to reduce a variety of risk factors.

The human brain is wired to notice and respond to threats: the fight-flight response, from an evolutionary perspective, is what has preserved the human race. And although we've lived in a constant state of threat over this last year, science tells us that we have every reason to be hopeful. Numerous psychological studies (including, for example, studies of the after-effects of the 9/11 attacks) have demonstrated that most individuals respond with resilience when faced with trauma and adversity. Resilience is the rule, not the exception.

There are both individual and environmental factors that affect a person's resilience, in other words, both nature and nurture play a role. Some individual characteristics associated with resilience are problem-solving skills, the ability to self-regulate, the tendency to be extraverted or social, and psychological flexibility. Environmental factors include effective parenting, a safe home, neighborhood and school environment, and social support.

Parents can foster resilience in their children in numerous ways:

- Help your child learn a process for problem solving (define the problem; generate ideas; evaluate the ideas; try the idea that seems the best; evaluate the results). Encourage your child to see problems as challenges, and to actively address problems rather than avoid them.
- Help your child learn and commit to self-regulation practices, including mindfulness and breathing exercises. Help him/her to identify the things that boost his/her positive emotions, and to build those things into daily and weekly routines.
- Caring for one's body is a critical component of emotion regulation. Healthy eating, exercise, adequate sleep, and adhering to medication regimens are essential to foster resilience. Consistently enforce bedtime and lights-out/electronics-off schedules.
- Support psychological flexibility by challenging all/none, black/white, right/wrong thinking patterns, and by encouraging awareness and acceptance of difficult emotions. Help children learn to tell the difference between things they cannot control (and thus must "accept"), and things they can control (and can actively tackle as "challenges").
- Foster hope by emphasizing a "growth" rather than a "fixed" mindset: intellectual and social-emotional skills can be developed, they are not "fixed" at birth.
- Encourage and support social connection. Help your child find creative ways to connect with friends virtually. Facilitate regular video chats with friends/relatives/coaches/teachers.
- Communicate regularly with teachers and seek mental health and/or social support services as needed.

Resources:

[Building Your Resilience](#)

[Designed for Success | Psychology Today](#)