

PARENTING RESILIENT CHILDREN: The Power of Protective Factors

By Kevin M. Powell, Ph.D.

As parents, we all want our children to grow up to be happy, stable adults. A key to achieving this goal is to raise children who develop **Resilience**. Resilience has been defined as the process of effectively negotiating, adapting to, or managing significant sources of stress or trauma. Resilient people are able to cope and bounce back from life challenges.

Being resilient is important for all of us since we all face life challenges. These life stressors can include academic struggles, social isolation, social rejection, discrimination, poverty, living in an unstable home, various types of interpersonal victimization, breakup with a romantic partner, struggles with anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues, personal mistakes, criminal offenses, substance use problems, physical health problems, death of a loved one, and COVID-19. Responding to life's hard times and personal missteps in resilient ways is a big part of leading a happy and successful life.

So how do we enhance resilience in children? One answer is the promotion of **Protective Factors**, which include a variety of assets and resources that have been linked to resilience.

A metaphor for understanding '*protective factors*' and '*resilience*', is thinking about the process of learning to skateboard for the first time (Powell, 2015, page 32). If we wear a helmet, knee pads, and elbow pads (protective factors), it will help buffer our falls (life's adverse experiences) and lower our risk of getting injured. We will be more resilient in our quest to become a skilled skateboarder. In contrast, if we do not wear safety equipment (no protective factors), we will have a higher risk of getting injured and giving up (less resilient) in our pursuit to become a skateboarder. We all need some protective factors to buffer life's falls and to maintain a resilient spirit.



It would be nice if there was just one ‘holy grail’ protective factor that creates resilient children (and parents); however, human behavior is way too complex to be influenced by just one factor. Research has identified many protective factors linked to resilience, some are *individual* characteristics and skills, while others come from external *family* influences and/or *community* supports & resources. All three areas of protection have been linked to resilient positive outcomes, including better physical health, psychological health, social relationships, and healthier living environments. These positive outcomes are what we all want for our children, so let’s take a closer look at some resilience-enhancing protective factors.

Protective Factors that can Enhance Resilience

Providing a comprehensive list of every protective factor linked to resilience is beyond the scope of this blog, but a few influential protections are described below, along with strategies for how to bolster these factors in our children. The protective factors are organized into Individual, Family, and Community protections. It is important to note that no child (or parent) possesses every protective factor, which is okay since we do not need them all to lead a resilient life.



INDIVIDUAL Protective Factors linked to Resilience

1. Self-Regulation Skills: The ability to regulate thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in stable ways.

- Teach and model for children how to use words to express thoughts and feelings in calm and respectful ways.
- Teach and model de-escalation strategies, such as deep breathing, taking self-timeouts, and using positive self-talk.

- Help children to recognize their feelings of ‘hurt and sadness’, which is often at the root of anger and aggression. Label the expression of ‘hurt and sadness’ as a strength, not a weakness (Powell, 2015, pg. 136).

2. Problem-Solving Skills: The ability to think about our problems as opportunities to learn and grow.

- Normalize for children how we all face problems and make mistakes in life. No one is perfect.
- Stay calm and do not overreact to problems.
- Teach and model how to think through problems, generate possible solutions, and consider the potential outcomes/consequences (e.g., make a pros and cons list).

3. Talents: Possessing prosocial talents and passions that enhance personal self-confidence.

Provide children with a variety of activities that give them opportunities to discover their passions and develop their skills (e.g., reading, writing, art, music, dancing, science, mechanics, computer literacy, culinary arts, carpentry, athletics).

4. Perseverance: The ability to work hard and not give up, even when things get tough.

- Talk with children about the value of not giving up when faced with difficult tasks in school and in life.

Normalize for children that everyone struggles at times, experiences failures, and life is not always easy.

- Share examples from your own life when you struggled and had to work hard to overcome something. With my own children, I have shared stories about my childhood struggles with dyslexia (learning difference) and how I had to study extra hard in school. I talk about how learning to study and work hard, really helped me in school and in life.
- Praise children for their effort and work hard on tasks, not just the final product (e.g., praise your child for their hard work on a school assignment, regardless of the grade they earn).

5. Self-Efficacy: Having a belief that your actions and choices influence what happens in your life.

- Provide children with opportunities to make choices and exercise some personal control in their life (e.g., “*Would you like to have cereal or pancakes for breakfast?*” “*Would you like to go to bed right now or in 10 minutes?*”).
- As children age, help them to understand that we cannot always control what others do, but we can control what we do. We can control when and how we interact with people who are unstable, and we can surround ourselves with safe, stable, and supportive people. Being ‘streetwise’ about who we spend time with is a sign of resilience.

FAMILY Protective Factors linked to Resilience

1. **Having Relationships with Caregivers who are Stable, Supportive, and Prosocial:** *One of the most powerful and prominent protective factors linked to resilience is when children have a prosocial parental figure who genuinely cares about them and consistently supports them in good and bad times.*



Important Note for Caregivers/ Parents: To be the healthy, stable caregivers that our children need, *self-care* is a must! To be at our best, all parents need adequate rest and sleep, good social connections/ supports, opportunities for alone time, healthy diet, physical exercise, etc.

2. **Living in a Safe, Predictable Home: Safe, stable, nurturing homes can enhance a child’s resilience.**

- Meet children’s basic human needs including the need for food, shelter, sleep, physical safety, psychological safety, and social connections.
- Set up predictable, structured routines including...
 - Bedtime routine (e.g., take bath, put on pajamas, brush teeth, read a story with parent).
 - Morning time routine.
 - Regular times for laundry and housekeeping duties.
 - Regular mealtimes.
 - Regular check-ins with your child to talk about their activities and experiences.

- Make time for fun, leisure activities (e.g., reading, music, bike rides, hikes, family game night).
- As parents, we must choose friends and partners who will be kind, stable, and safe around us and our children.

3. Having Opportunities to Cope with a Manageable Degree of Adversity.

Research has revealed that when people experience a moderate degree of life challenges and have opportunities to cope with it, it can increase their resilience and other positive outcomes.

- When our children are confronted with moderate life challenges (e.g., sibling or peer conflicts, academic struggle), we need to encourage them to use their personal coping skills to work through it, rather than rescue them from it.

As parents, we want to protect our kids from extreme adversity and traumatic experiences, but we must be careful not to become overly protective. If we deprive our kids of opportunities to practice coping with adversity, we can impair their resilience. Returning to the skateboard metaphor, it is reasonable to provide a child with a helmet and knee/elbow pads when learning to skateboard; however, it is not reasonable to cover them in bubble wrap or forbid them from skateboarding at all. Children need practice learning how to manage life's challenges.

COMMUNITY Protective Factors linked to Resilience

1. Having Relationships with People in the Community who are Stable and Positive.

Resilient people often form connections with kind, supportive people in their community including teachers, coaches, neighbors, friends' parents, therapists, ministers, and/or people from their culture/ethnic background with whom they identify.



- Provide children with opportunities to connect with people in the community who genuinely care about them and who provide support & encouragement.

2. Having Social Connections with Positive Peers

Resilient people frequently form connections with kind, supportive friends.

- Provide opportunities for children to connect with positive peers through prosocial activities.

- As children age into the teenage years, talk with them about the difference between healthy and unhealthy relationships. *Healthy relationships* include...mutual respect, trust, good emotional regulation, kindness, compassion, and reciprocal communication. *Unhealthy relationships* can include...extreme jealousy and possessiveness, disrespectful actions, dishonesty, verbal abuse, and physical aggression.

3. Having Connections to Positive Activities and Organizations

Resilient people often get involved with activities that are positive for themselves and others.

- Introduce children and teens to activities and organizations that provide positive, prosocial ways to spend free time (e.g., sports, physical exercise, band, orchestra, charitable work, clubs, afterschool jobs).

Everyone faces life challenges, and we all fall off our skateboards from time to time. Fortunately, everyone also has the capacity to respond with resilience...when we have enough individual, family, and community protective factors to buffer the falls. Helping our children (and their parents!) to acquire resilience-enhancing protective factors is essential for leading a happy, stable, and resilient life.

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