

# Building Resilience in Your Children & Grandchildren

*The key to thriving in a life filled with bumps and bruises.*



*by*

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**M**ost adults take their daily responsibilities seriously; they go to work, pay bills, keep the house in shape, do taxes, participate in community affairs, and, oh, yes, they also raise their children. The tasks never end, the responsibilities never fade away. That's what it means to be a grown up.

But we should never lose sight of the fact that being a kid isn't exactly a stress-free holiday, either. Sure, they don't pay rent or make car payments, but they do study for tests, compete for spots on sports teams or musical/theater productions, struggle to fit in with their peers, and deal with the onset of a slew of physical and emotional changes. To be a child means to live in a whirlwind of non-stop change. And to get through that whirlwind and come out at the other end as a well-adjusted, productive, empathetic, and responsible young adult requires the mastery of one of life's most important—and difficult—skills: **resilience**. The resilient child is confident. She cares for others. She is curious about the world around her, she is independent, and, undergirding all of those characteristics, she is patient and can bounce back quickly from the difficulties that life brings to her.

In our work with families in the heritage design process, the topic of resilience as a critical life skill and attitude set comes up frequently. That is especially true when we work with parents and grandparents (and more than a few aunts and uncles, too) to help them recognize the importance of raising resilient children. As we draw out their own life stories and lessons, we look for those times when they faced frustration, difficulty, and even failure. We often delve into the specific ways they learned how to deal with stress and setbacks, rejection and disappointment. "Do you remember what that felt like?" is an important question we use during the guided discovery interview process. We know from working with successful, resilient parents that their sense of

self-worth comes from focusing on what they have accomplished, not what they failed at. It is no different with children.

Fortunately, children come packaged with a certain level of in-born resilience. Anyone who has watched a three-year old wipe away his tears, brush off his skinned elbow and get right back on his tricycle understands that. And, the parent or grandparent who is intentionally and consistently working to instill resilience in that three-year old won't be racing out to the driveway to make a big deal of the spill. They know they can't always stay one step ahead of trouble and snatch the child from every danger he may face. Even at three, children can learn how to get right back up onto the bike after a tumble.

*"You may have to fight a battle more than once to win it."*  
Margaret Thatcher

## Mentoring for resilience

We work as guides for the families we serve. We don't pontificate or lecture or make judgments. Instead, we help to migrate moms, dads, aunts, uncles and grandparents along decision-making paths that are based entirely on their visions for what they want for themselves and their families—for their own reasons. We help them to clarify and articulate their desired outcomes, and to find ways to share that vision with their families.

In that process, we highlight the value of intrafamily mentoring, and we do exercises designed to help those who will be doing the mentoring to experience it in hands-on circumstances. Everyone in the family—and we mean everyone—has some unique skill set, talent, passion, experience, wisdom, or ability that they can share with children, grandchildren, nieces and nephews.



This is important both because of the learning that takes place in the mentoring process, as well as for the way it teaches children how to work together as a family. Of course, it is also a great way to get every member of the family involved in some productive way that will benefit the rising generations.

Children learn from what their parents and grandparents model in daily living, not just what they talk about. In fact, when it comes to building resilient children, the old maxim that actions speak louder than words is the rule of the day. If you want your child to be able to shake off the dust and move on after something didn't go so well for them, you might want to ask yourself these questions: how do you deal with setbacks at work, arguments with a spouse, or even something as small as being

cut off in traffic by someone (you think at the moment) who has no business getting within 100 feet of a set of car keys? Do you model good humor, tolerance of others' mistakes, and an open willingness to listen to different points of view? Do you judge and condemn weakness and bad behavior in others, or do you express



empathy and seek to understand? Do you have a personal mechanism for coping with things that anger or frustrate you, or do your kids head for the back yard when they see the tell-tale signs that signal that Mt. Dad is about to erupt in a volcanic rage?

The mentoring process is a modeling process. The kids are already watching your every move, and they are learning to deal with their own lives based on the model you are showing them in real-time. That can be a good thing, or it can spell trouble ahead for them, depending on what kind of model you are. And by the way, we are not talking about perfect parenting. We all make mistakes with our children. But, an intentional, deliberate, and consistent program of mentoring will make working through and adjusting course after making mistakes a heck of a lot easier. Your children need to know that messing up is a routine part of life for every person, and, sadly, at every age. As a mentor and model, you can demonstrate that the most important issue wasn't how you fouled up at something. What really matters is how you dealt with it. Did you acknowledge your screw up? If called for, did you apologize to anyone you may have wronged? Did you learn a lesson that you can articulate, and,

most importantly, did you share that lesson with your children or grandchildren?

Children who witness resilient behavior by their parents and grandparents receive a gift that no textbook or lecture can equal. When grandad is diagnosed with cancer, for example, and goes on to face his surgery, chemotherapy, and radiation with equal measures of grace and grit, he models the best and most important characteristics that anyone in the family could hope to emulate if they themselves have to undergo such a life-changing situation someday. The five-year old he taught to cast a fishing line into a pond and to patiently wait for a nibble learned both a practical life skill and an invaluable characteristic of resilience, simply by going fishing. And when that five-year old is twenty, and watches

grandad fight the greatest battle of his life, yet another lesson in resilience will be imprinted in the young man's mind and heart forever.

*"Do not judge me by my success, judge me by how many times I fell down and got backup again."*

Nelson Mandela

### **Some basic guidelines**

Teaching children to be resilient is a situational, on-the-job experience. You can't assign a book on how to be resilient, and forget about lectures. Parents and grandparents have to keep their eyes open for opportunities to do what they can to encourage the development of resilient skills, especially when the 'unexpected' happens. Among the basic guidelines for encouraging resilience are these:

1. *Pass your stories & life lessons.* Of all of the gifts you can share with your children and grandchildren, this is far and away the most important. We know that when you pass your money and other assets, you are passing what you *own*. to those who come after you. When you share your life stories and lessons, you are passing who you *are*. Guess which inheritance is the most important? Make sure your children know how you became the person you are—and don't leave out the struggles and mistakes!

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2. *Coach, don't control.* Do your best to teach skills and strategies, but remember: when the buzzer rings, it's their game, not yours. Back off, let them play their game, whether it's on the field, in the classroom, or on the first job.

3. *Risk is a part of real life.* Let your children and grandchildren take risks that are appropriate to their age and maturity level. Learning how to weigh risk vs. reward (and to act!) is one of the most important characteristics of a resilient personality. Life is hard, and snowflakes melt the minute they encounter heat. Resilient children learn how to take the heat.

4. *Make sure they can do stuff.* How to use a hammer, how to mow a lawn, how to save money, how to behave in social settings, how to be on time, how to ask good questions. Real world skills are invaluable. As a child racks them up she



becomes more confident and self-assured. After all, in the real world, people get flat tires on dark, rainy, isolated highways. How much better is everybody going to feel knowing that if that should happen, she can pop open the trunk, pull out the jack and the spare, and get herself back on the road in just a few minutes.

5. *Don't ask so many 'why' questions.* Asking 'how are you going to fix your broken skateboard?' is far more powerful and impactful than asking 'why did you break your skateboard?' Why questions can instill shame and regret. 'How' and 'what' questions sharpen problem-solving skills.

6. *Start them off early.* Young children love learning new skills, and they are up to the challenge. Have confidence when they try something new, and don't hover anxiously when they make their first attempt. If you do that, they know you believe that they are going to fail. (And, yes, they probably will fail the first couple of times. Let them. They will figure it out.)

7. *Your child messed up? Good!* At least it's a good thing if the end result of the mess up is that they take responsibility, learn how to do it right, and don't make the same mistake again. A good mistake is worth its weight in gold.

8. *It should be about the effort, not the results.* Resilient people don't run away at the first sign of trouble. They don't give up on a task if they don't do it perfectly. They understand that what really matters is whether or not they gave it their all. If something didn't work out just right, they go back to the drawing board. A different approach, different tactics, different attitude. And, you guessed it, they learn that lesson by watching you and other significant people in their lives. It's wise to keep the scoring at a minimum, and the encouragement at the maximum. When they do eventually succeed at whatever the challenge might be, their personal sense of satisfaction, confidence and self-worth will soar.

### **Everything, every day.**

Almost everything you do with, for, to, and around your children and grandchildren every day impacts them in some way. As a family leader, guide, and mentor, you have an almost limitless supply of daily opportunities to model the key behavioral characteristics of a resilient individual. Some of those opportunities can be planned for; others will just pop up out of nowhere by themselves. ("Honey, help! Ralfie put peanut butter on the bread before he put it in the toaster!")

As with all important life issues, teaching children to be resilient requires a deft combination of skill, talent, knowledge, patience, and above all, love. Just as we encourage our babies to crawl, then stand up, then walk, and one day, to ride that bike without training wheels, so too, can we model and encourage a whole host of attitudes and behaviors in our children and grandchildren that will embed a spirit of resilience within them that will serve them well throughout their lives.

In our work with families, we use the vehicle of mentoring to get people to consciously think about the value of resilience, and then to foster resilient attitudes in their children and grandchildren. You don't have to work in organized, professionally guided settings like these to teach resilience in your own family, of course. The key is to be aware that when it comes to teaching resilient behavior, you are the model that matters most. Your children and grandchildren are watching you more than you know, because they want to learn how to be just like you. It may sound a bit counterintuitive, but the best way for them to accomplish that worthy objective is to learn to stand on their own two feet, to make decisions their own way, to be independent, confident, empathetic, and consistent.

## Conclusion

The goal of achieving personal success means something different to each of us. No two journeys to success are quite the same, and the view from the mountaintop is a picture that we paint by ourselves, for ourselves. And, even though there is no single detailed menu of skills, talents, and attitudes that can be used to describe all successful people, we do know there is one thing they all share in common. The businessman and the ball player, the poet and the surgeon, the teacher, the farmer, the stay-at-home mom and the astronaut are all *resilient* people.

Whatever the world of two hundred years in the future may look like, however many technological and cultural shifts may have taken place, we'd bet dollars to donuts that the happiest, most fulfilled, and productive people living in the 23rd century will also be those who possess the most resilient characters.

### *Research connects the relationship between your family story & your children's resilience*

In the mid-1990s, Emory University psychologist Marshall Duke and his colleague, Dr. Robyn Fivush, began to study the roles of myth and ritual in American families. One of their most significant initial findings was that children who knew a lot about their families tended to do better when they faced challenges. That conclusion was bolstered after the terrorist attacks in New York City on 9/11. After the attack, the researchers went back and reassessed the children they had studied earlier.

"Once again," Dr. Duke said, "the ones who knew more about their families proved to be more resilient, meaning they could moderate the effects of stress."<sup>1</sup>

According to Duke and Fivush, when children have a sense of being part of a larger family, and when that family maintains, passes, and cherishes its own, unique 'unifying narrative,' they are more self-confident, and they gain a stronger sense of control over their own lives.

Simply put, Duke and Fivush concluded, self-confident children have what they called a "strong intergenerational self." They understand that they belong to something that is much bigger than themselves. They belong to a family.

*If you haven't told your story to your children and / or grandchildren, it is never too late. The benefits will last for generations.*



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