

Raising Resilient Children

- Mrs Saradha Ramachandran, Senior Counsellor/Associate Consultant, HELP FSC

Separation/Divorce/Death bring about many changes in the lives of the children. They have to face many challenges at home, in school and in the society. They have to cope with their mixed feelings – sadness, anger, hurt, bitterness, pain, excitement, anxiety, fear, uncertainty, insecurity, confusion, relief – and deal with the changes in their life to bring stability back to the family. The changes could be related to the living arrangements; relationships and roles in the family, family's financial situation. Some children overcome the challenges and obstacles effectively and build their resilience. Some become trapped in their early experiences and are unable to bounce back from the stress and crisis due to the separation/divorce/death.

Why are some children able to overcome the challenges and some are not? It is due to the resilience in the children. What is resilience? It refers to the ability to deal effectively with stress and pressure, to cope with everyday challenges, to bounce back from disappointments, adversity and trauma to develop clear and realistic goals to solve problems, to relate comfortably to others and to treat oneself and others with respect. They are able to hold their self-esteem and grow up as healthy individuals.

How can we develop resilience in children?

1. Help the children to express their feelings about the loss and changes.

Give a listening ear to raise their concerns and viewpoints. Put yourself in their shoes and see their perceptions of the world around. It is not necessary to agree with everything your children say or do. But make attempts to appreciate and validate their feelings and their view points. This provides an opportunity for expressing themselves, clarification and further discussion. Effective communication involves actively listening to children, understanding and validating what they are attempting to say and responding by not interrupting them, by not telling them how they should be feeling, by not putting them down and not advising them.

2. Each child copes with the loss differently as each relationship is unique to them.

Their recovery is also different. Young children may not know how to express their feelings. They may show it in their behaviour. Accept the children for who they are and help them to set realistic goals and expectations. Accepting the children and appreciating their different temperaments does not mean that we excuse inappropriate, unacceptable behaviour but rather that we understand this behaviour and help them to change it in a manner that does not lessen a child's self esteem and sense of dignity.

3. Love your child in his love language

Speak your child's love language. Find out which one of these your child speaks – Quality time, gifts, acts of service and physical touch. Learn your child's love languages and you'll discover how to express unconditional feelings of respect, affection and commitment that will resonate in his soul. We need to make the child feel special, unique and appreciated without indulging them. The children need unconditional love without any expectations on them. As parents, this may be difficult, but we can try to by building trust in our children and attending to our needs. We tend to reflect our needs onto our children.

4. Redefine the roles and responsibilities of the children and other family members.

Provide opportunities for clarification of the roles and responsibilities.

5. Create structure and rules at home.

Rules and routines include tasks the child is expected to perform. The consequences are clearly stated and understood. When rules are broken, the child is helped to understand what he/she did wrong and encourage to tell his/her side of what happened. The child is punished when needed and is then forgiven and reconciled with the adult. The parents do not harm the child in punishment.

6. Disciplining the children in a way that promotes self-discipline and self-worth.

It is about teaching and guiding, helping children to make wise decisions about their behaviour and to accept responsibility for their choices and actions. This nurtures self control or self discipline.

7. Develop the children's ability to solve problems, weigh the different choices, make decisions and be responsible for their choices and decisions.

The parents do not tell the children what to do but rather engage the children in thinking about possible solutions. The parents assist the children in defining their problems, to consider different solutions to these problems, attempt what they judge to be the most appropriate solution and learn from the outcome. It does not imply "giving into" or "spoiling" children but rather serves to teach the youngsters that there are alternative ways of solving problems. It helps to teach children to be more responsible and accountable in handling difficult situations. Children need encouragement. We are also able to see the ability of children to think about effective, realistic ways of managing problems and develop trust in them. When children develop their own plans of action with the guidance and support of the parents, their sense of ownership and control are reinforced as is their ability to be resilient.

8. Normalise mistakes in life and help children to perceive them as opportunities to learn. Instil hope in them.

When children who are not very hopeful, they tend to experience mistakes as an indication that they are failures. They are likely to retreat from challenges, feeling inadequate and blaming self and others. The parents' words and actions need to communicate a belief that we can learn from mistakes.

9. Help the children experience success by identifying and reinforcing their strengths.

Resilient children use their abilities and strengths to deal with their difficulties or challenges. Children tend to feel hopeless when they perceive themselves and their abilities poorly. Then they minimize or fail to appreciate their abilities. They are less likely to accept positive comments and feedbacks from others around them. However we need to continue providing positive feedback, highlight their strengths and abilities to handle issues. They need to experience the success that is important to them and others around to build their self worth, hope and resilience. The children may then be more open to handle challenges in their life with the encouragement and support of people around them.

Children develop their resilience over time at different rates. A resilient child is able to love and accept himself. He is able to give and receive love. He can do things by himself/herself and accept the consequences of the behaviour. He believes that there is hope for her/him and that there are other people who can be trusted. The child is able to express his/her thoughts and feelings to others. He/she can listen to what others are saying and can communicate effectively. The child can assess the nature and scope of a problem, what he/she needs to do to resolve it, and what help is needed from others. The child can negotiate solutions with others and may find creative solutions.

In order to promote resilience in children, we, as parents, need to role model a resilient behaviour, take care of our needs and get support from trusting relationships around us.

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