



A Parent's Roadmap to Building Resilience



A quick primer on stress and the brain

There is no doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic is escalating feelings of stress in children (and adults!). Because their brains are still growing, children and teens alike need extra practice handling stress, calming themselves down, problem solving, and dealing with challenge.

When it comes to practice though, the correct dosage is critical. Too much stress shuts down the executive center and disrupts the brain's developing architecture. Too little stress robs the brain of practice in meeting life's challenges.

Too much stress

Toxic stress is the type that results from prolonged, frequent, and intense experiences of adversity without any adult support. The same hormones that improve our response in the short term damage memory, undermine learning, and depress the immune system in the long term.



Basic feelings of safety and security are necessary for children to harness the power of their brain for new learning. Through warm and caring relationships, we can buffer children from toxic stress.

Too little stress

Yet as Dr. Bruce Perry reminds us in his book *Born for Love*, "Just as you wouldn't build muscle by resting all week and then trying to lift a hundred pounds just one time every Friday morning, you can't build a healthy stress response system by complete protection from stress or occasional exposure to an overwhelming dose."



If our kids are never disappointed they never learn how to deal with setbacks. If they never lose, they don't learn how to handle defeat. If they are never frustrated, they never learn persistence.

Resilience is the ability to struggle through challenge and recover from stress. Resilience is what enables our kids to fall down and pick themselves up again. Resilience is not hard wired. It can be nurtured and learned.

Big Idea #1

Real Self-Esteem Powers Resilience

What do you mean by real self-esteem?

We all want kids to feel capable and proud of themselves. That's why it feels like a no brainer to focus on boosting their self-esteem whenever we can. After all, the phrase "self-esteem is the key to happiness" is pretty widely accepted in the U.S. An entire industry has exploded in the last forty years that guarantees "enhanced self esteem" to those who sign up for newsletters, classes, products or retreats.

The problem is that this industry orbits around the wrong definition of self-esteem. Instead of helping kids build confidence, too many of these programs have caused adults to buy into three powerful myths that actually undermine resilience:

1. Myth #1: Self-esteem comes first and leads to success.

The real deal: Skill building and achievement (even in really small ways) leads to better self-esteem, not the other way around.

2. Myth #2: Self-esteem = Feeling good

The real deal: There is nothing wrong with feeling good, it just isn't the same as self-esteem. Heaping praise and constant adoration on children regardless of their effort or outcomes can actually make them less willing to take on challenges.

3. Myth #3: Stress, challenge, and disappointment damage self-esteem.

The real deal: Toxic stress isn't good for anyone, especially children. But the only way that children learn how to handle appropriate levels of stress and challenge is by navigating it.

It turns out that real self-esteem is built as our children learn how to handle the ups and downs of life, set goals and meet them, collaborate with others, and build their toolkit for handling stress. It's worth noting that their goals and achievements do not need to be big; they just need to be real.

The COVID-19 pandemic is certainly a source of *too much* stress in many family's lives. Too many of us are facing economic instability, loss of housing, illness and even death. We should do everything in our power to protect families and children from this kind of stress.

For many children though, there are ample opportunities for children learn how to handle smaller and more manageable sources of stress. As kids learn how to navigate conflict with siblings, build new routines, and practice new coping strategies, they are building important musculature to handle stress and power real self-esteem.

Real Self-Esteem and Resilience Checklist

Read the following statements about building real self-esteem in your kids even while you are sheltering in place during this epidemic.

1. I know that connection with my kids is the number one way that I can protect them from too much stress. I am making time to enjoy my kids and to play and connect every day - even when it is hard.

☐ Never thought of this. ☐ I try! ☐ Got this one covered.

2. I am encouraging my child to connect with other adults who help them feel valued, safe, and secure during shelter in place. I am helping them with the technology to be in touch on a regular basis.

☐ Never thought of this. ☐ I try! ☐ Got this one covered.

3. I give my child honest specific praise, connected with effort and growing skills.

☐ Never thought of this. ☐ I try! ☐ Got this one covered.

4. I provide care and support, but don't always solve my child's problems or do a task or job that they could do for themselves.

☐ Never thought of this. ☐ I try! ☐ Got this one covered.

5. I acknowledge when something is difficult and encourage them to problem solve.

☐ Never thought of this. ☐ I try! ☐ Got this one covered.

6. I normalize mistakes and mini-failures and model that we learn as we go.

☐ Never thought of this. ☐ I try! ☐ Got this one covered.

7. I understand the impact of stress and have developmentally appropriate expectations for how my child as they cope with the changes caused by the pandemic.

☐ Never thought of this. ☐ I try! ☐ Got this one covered.

8. I can let my child feel sad or disappointed without trying to fix it right away.

☐ Never thought of this. ☐ I try! ☐ Got this one covered.

9. I encourage my child to think about what they can do to help, spread joy, or support others in this pandemic, even if we are sheltering in place.

☐ Never thought of this. ☐ I try! ☐ Got this one covered.

Big Idea #2

Praise is a double-edged sword

Many of us are home with our children all day or are experiencing a lot of stress at work. We all desperately want to protect our children and help them feel okay during this uncertain time. Praise is one of the go-to tools we parents often use to help our children feel better. But praise is tricky when it comes to confidence and resilience. The right kind of praise and encouragement can help our children feel supported and take on challenge. But some praise inadvertently works against those goals:

- **Insincere praise can lead to doubts of competence.** Showering kids with words that hold no meaning or substance can cause children to lose trust in your words. Worse yet, they may grow to doubt their abilities in the absence of accurate feedback.
- **Generic praise may lead to risk avoidance.** If you constantly tell children that they are naturally and universally brilliant, they may be less likely to challenge themselves and take risks, lest they disappoint you or appear "less brilliant" as they struggle.
- **Constant praise can decrease persistence and cause constant checking.** Children may become dependent on praise if they become accustomed to continuous positive feedback. This erodes their confidence to work through assessment and challenges on their own.

So where does this leave us?

We absolutely want children to feel loved, known, and encouraged by the adults in their lives - especially right now. Many children need extra words of encouragement that they can do hard things during a difficult time. That is exactly why we want to make sure that we praise kids in ways that boost their confidence, instead of eroding it.

1. **Praise the effort more than natural ability.** "You got everything right on your math sheet", try, "I am so proud of you for sitting down to do your school work in the middle of all of these big changes."
2. **Make praise specific, not generic.** "I noticed that you waved at our elder neighbor and asked them if they need anything. I love that about you."
3. **Praise has to be sincere.** Instead of, "This art you made for Grandma is perfect!" try "I know that you have been thinking about Grandma a lot lately. I loved that you wanted to make her something. How do you feel about what you made?"
4. **Praise should be intermittent, not overdone.** Instead of taking a small thing and blowing it out of proportion, match the praise to the action. Sometimes just naming an accomplishment and smiling is enough. "You finished it!"

Big Idea #3

Prepare your child for new challenges

3 ways to help your child take on new challenges:

**Support your
child's effort.**

**Learn from
- don't avoid -
frustration and
setbacks**

**Give honest
praise.**

Reflect:

- ☐ Consider the three Self-Esteem Myths (Self-esteem leads to success; Self-esteem equals feeling good; and Stress/challenge/disappointment damage self-esteem). Which one of these is the hardest to let go of? Why?
- ☐ Now go back to the Self-Esteem and Resilience Inventory. What is one thing you are especially good at?
- ☐ What is one thing you can work on?
- ☐ Now, think of one concrete action you can take. For example, you can acknowledge your child's feelings this week without trying to "fix it." Write this down! Tell someone else so they can help you make it happen.

Big Idea #4

Kids need us to tackle the toxins to resilience

“Our job isn’t to smooth out all of the bumps in the road but to give our kids the shock absorbers to handle them.”

So true! But it is important to note that the road is not equally bumpy for all children and we don’t all have the same resources at our disposal for road maintenance – especially in the middle of a crisis. Our children’s self-esteem is not only shaped by parenting and praise, it is also profoundly shaped by cultural messages and real barriers to progress.

Racism, classism and other -isms are often amplified during a crisis – whether that be the anti-Asian discrimination on the rise during the pandemic or the class divides taking shape as districts navigate the challenge of distance learning. We have to face these toxins head on or our children simply absorb their lessons.

A few more essentials to add to the self-esteem checklist for parents whose kids’ identities are not affirmed by dominant culture.

- ✚ I name and celebrate the strengths of my family and child’s cultural identity. I help my child learn that their identity and cultural practices are sources of JOY and healing.
- ✚ I am sensitive to and validate my child’s feelings of anger, sadness, or fear as they cope with discrimination and stereotypes.
- ✚ My child has access to racial or cultural affinity groups online who are using their cultural traditions to respond to this pandemic.
- ✚ I talk to friends, a therapist, elders, or a partner about my own stress and trauma around navigating racism and/or other -isms.
- ✚ I can name adults that my child is in touch with during shelter in place who affirm and celebrate my child’s identity

For parents whose kids’ identities are affirmed by dominant culture.

- ✚ I know that I am a powerful model for my kids and examine my everyday behaviors for ways that I perpetuate stereotypes and discrimination.
- ✚ I am using this pandemic as a way to educate myself and teach my children about the dire consequences of inequality and why we commit to building equitable systems and communities.
- ✚ I have read the post [“An Invitation to White Parents – How to Talk To Kids About Race”](#)

Sources: (Dunbar, 2017; Holcomb, 2018; Reynolds, 2017; Anderson, 2017; Hagerman, 2017).