Preparing Our Children To Thrive:
A strengths-based approach to parenting

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INTRODUCTION

“Wealth of parenting is not to prepare the path for our children - rather, to prepare them for the path they will inevitably need to walk.”

Wayne Hammond

Parents want their children to grow up well—to be happy, principled, and grounded, and to form lasting and healthy relationships. We want our children to do well in school, get meaningful jobs, and to give back to their communities, nations, and world.

Sometimes those aspirations can seem far removed from the day-to-day realities that we experience as our children grow. As parents, it’s easy to get so caught up in daily worries that we forget to focus on the things we are doing that can make a big difference later in life. Yet the way we parent today plays an essential role in our children’s long-term success in education, career, health, and relationships.

**Characteristics of a Resilient Child**

- They feel self-confident, optimistic and empowered.
- They are understanding and sympathetic with the feelings of others (as well as their own).
- They have learned to set realistic goals and expectations for themselves.
- They have productive coping strategies that are growth-fostering rather than self-defeating.
- They see challenges as opportunities confront and learn from - they see mistakes as a way of learning.
- They are aware of their limitations, but use strengths to cope.
- They have effective interpersonal skills and can seek out assistance and nurturance.
- They have a deep and caring relationship with one or more adults.
- They know what they can and cannot control in their lives.
RESILIENCY

The focus on resilience began as an effort to determine why children from the same challenging environments might achieve different levels of success and happiness.

Researchers wanted to know what protective forces in children’s lives buffered them from all that was wrong. It was determined that resilience is an essential factor in determining not only which children will adapt, but who will thrive. Resilience is commonly defined as an ability to bounce back and adapt when faced with challenging situations. Not only do they bounce back from adversity; children who are resilient develop social, academic, and vocational competence, and a strong sense of optimism despite being exposed to significant stress and the everyday challenges of growing up in a fast-changing and unpredictable world.

Why is Resiliency Important?

Resilient children are able to thrive by overcoming difficult situations and they go on to lead healthy, successful lives. They are less likely to turn to high-risk behaviours such as drug use, bullying, or self-harm, and are more likely to be involved in healthy activities like volunteering, mentoring, sports, clubs, and leadership.

The number and quality of internal (personal beliefs one has about themselves) and external (transformational influences one has in their support influences and relationships) developmental strengths a child has determines how resilient he or she is, regardless of economic status, race, ethnicity, genetics, place of residence, or heredity. Building on a child’s developmental strengths, rather than fixing his or her weaknesses, leads to positive capacity-building and transitions through the developmental stages toward adulthood.

Resiliency as a Process

It is important to understand that resilience is uneven – a child might be resilient in one situation, but need a higher level of support and nurturing in another. Resilience is not invulnerability to risk; rather, resilience is a quality that allows children to be prepared to successfully navigate a stressful and complicated world. Resilience is not the trait of a “perfect child”. Perfectionists struggle with stress and fear making any mistakes. They may perform or behave well, but do not take chances to perform at their very best. Resilient children are more proactive and successful because they have a natural orientation to believe in their strengths in ways that allows them to stretch their limits in constructive ways and learn from their mistakes.
While it does indeed “take a village to raise a child”, the best starting point is at home, with parents. It is essential for children to develop deep, strong roots through positive relationships with their parents and to be supported by other significant adults and peers so that their resilience will carry them successfully into the future.

Parents who engage in the process of raising resilient children are guided by a road map of important guideposts, principles, ideas and actions. However, grasping the complexities of this road map is often an ongoing process filled with challenges, frustrations, setbacks, and successes. Although we may wish for a true, proven, golden path to the future, that path does not exist. We can, however, be encouraged by the knowledge that we have certain landmarks and strengths-based strategies to help us navigate each child’s unique journey. While each of us is influenced by a variety of factors including temperament, family values and educational experiences, strengths-based strategies and landmarks are applicable to each of our journeys, and can purposefully direct us in raising resilient children.

### The Mindset of the Strengths-Based Parent

**Strengths-Based parents:**

- Put the parent/child relationship before directing a child. They have the ability to demonstrate empathy by putting themselves in their child’s shoes.
- Communicate effectively and listen actively.
- Understand the need to change “negative scripts” – they have the insight and courage to think about doing things differently.
- Focus on and acknowledge the positive behaviours more often than challenging behaviours.
- Create opportunities for learning from mistakes and smart risk-taking, and build upon them to create a sense of confidence and self-efficacy.
- Support the development of responsibility, compassion, and a social conscience by providing their child opportunities to support worthy causes or to help others.
- Provide resources and learning opportunities for children to explore their interest, sparks and abilities.
- Accept their children for who they are and help them to set realistic goals and expectations.
- Connect children to other positive relationships or adult role models in their school, community and peer environments.
- Help their children to experience success by identifying their strengths and learning from failures.
- Help children to develop problem-solving skills by assisting them to solve their own problems rather than stepping in with their own solutions.
- Recognize a child’s capacity, maturity, common sense, and learning and communicate the message that “you have everything you need to succeed”
- Provide clear and consistent expectations and boundary setting that is both clear and warm.
- Challenge negative, defeatist thinking and encourage optimism.

*Marcel Proust*

The only real voyage of discovery exists, not in seeing new landscapes, but in having new eyes.
STRENGTH-BASED

WHAT STRENGTHS-BASED PARENTS DO DIFFERENTLY

Unlike a traditional parenting approach that focuses on avoiding risk and managing negative behaviours, the strength-based parenting approach focuses on positive relational interactions and capacity building strategies that will strengthen a child’s ability to be resilient and to meet life’s challenges with thoughtfulness, confidence, purpose, and empathy. While the journey of each child is shaped by a number of factors from the society and culture they are raised in, there are some critical guideposts and ideas that influence and direct the strengths-based approach.

1) Seeing a child as “at potential”, rather than as “at risk”
Guiding the mindset of a strengths-based parent is the critical idea that their child is amazing and needs to understand their unique potential and its implications for their journey in life. It is not about being afraid for your child and protecting them from all stress and risk, which often creates an enhanced vulnerability. Rather, strengths-based parents believe in the ability of their children to successfully take smart risks and overcome developmentally appropriate challenges, learn from them, and develop in healthy ways.

2) Preparing the child to walk the path
The purpose of strengths-based parenting is about building the capacity of a child to be resilient - an ‘inward-out’ process. It is a focus on what a child is becoming, as opposed to what they will be. If one focuses on the parenting process today, the behaviours will look after themselves tomorrow. Resilient children innately respond to challenges in constructive ways and slowly develop the essential characteristics that are considered to be the qualities of successful and productive members of society.

3) Connecting before teaching and directing
Essential to developing a child’s resilience is connecting - laying the foundation of a secure, trusting and loving parent-child relationship. Children need to know that they will always be cared for and supported in consistent ways where they feel valued, competent and confident about their future. Children who trust and feel valued by their parents will value and embrace the guidance their parents offer. A secure attachment to parents or caregiver early in life gives a child a solid foundation for developing trust, self-esteem, self-control and confidence, which are essential building blocks for learning how to empower oneself and forming healthy relationships with others. Its about accepting a child for who they are, not what you want them to be. Connectedness is the key reason why children embrace the major values and perspectives of their parents over the numerous societal and peers influences during the transitional teenage years – they value the relationship and do not want to disappoint those they care about.
4) **Promote learning from mistakes**
Strengths-based parents understand that loving a child is not based upon on whether or not they make mistakes. It is important to emphasize to our children that mistakes are not only accepted, but also expected. The focus of parenting is helping a child to explore and try new things, knowing that not every effort will result in success. Children need to know that making mistakes should not define who they are; rather it is what they do with the mistakes that defines them. Parents should serve as role-models for dealing well with mistakes and setbacks.

5) **Focus more on what is right and why it was right**
Parents need to celebrate a child’s accomplishments and emphasize the child’s role in successful coping. It is important to support the strengths that lead to small successes, then to continue building upon them to enhance success with more challenging opportunities – stretching your child to experience more than they thought they could accomplish. This process leads to the development of what Carol Dweck calls a “growth mindset” – a mindset that embraces challenges, persists in the face of setbacks, sees effort as an important key to success, learns from constructive criticism and advice. Developing a child’s strengths takes time and needs to be developmentally appropriate with realistic expectations.

6) **Understand the role of re-writing negative scripts**
When a current parenting strategy is not working, strengths-based parents know it is important to take a step back and consider a different option to that will be meaningful and receptive to the child. Disconnection with our children often has more to do with us as parents than with our children. Strengths-based parenting sees change as a parent-driven process – if you want to see certain change in your children, you need to start with yourself. In our role as a teacher (ages 1 to 12) and facilitator (ages 13 to 18), we often reflect obstacles or beliefs that create a disconnect with our child:

- Feel that one size fits all: all children can be parented the same way
- It’s not my job to change, it is my child’s role to just obey
- Our children should be more appreciative of our hard work and parental efforts
- My expectations and goals as a parent are realistic – if I say so
- It was the way I was parented – (excess baggage from the past)

**Five things to support re-writing our scripts:**
1. Accept your responsibility to change
2. Know what you have done so far and why it does or does not work
3. Explore the need behind the behaviour
4. Seek and ye shall find – every challenge has a solution
5. If at first you do not succeed, try again
7) Choosing the Right Teachable Moment

As parents, we have many opportunities to support and teach our children. However, if we become overly involved, we can burn out and frustrate our children. Young people who have overly controlling parents tend to choose one or several of the following:

- They will agree to your face, while doing whatever they want behind your back.
- They will defy you, since they think that no matter what they do they cannot make you happy.
- They will wait for their freedom, then they will do all that they can to prove you cannot control them anymore.

It is not about empty compliance or being overly controlling. Strengths-based parents understand the need to have expectations and to set boundaries in ways that are balanced and promote opportunities for building trust. Sometimes, letting go or getting out of the way is the wisest thing a parent can do. In many ways, the key is to negotiate as it creates the opportunity to connect with benefits:

- It encourages communication skills
- It teaches your child how to relate to and communicate with an adult
- It teaches decision making and the art of positive compromising
- It demonstrates respect
- It helps children to better understand the perspectives of others
- It focuses on responsibilities and priorities.

Strengths-based parents also understand that there are some things in a family that are non-negotiable. They are important enough that you will be firm and determined about them: things that are immoral, illegal, unsafe, unhealthy and cruel, or that are rude, disrespectful or unwise.
8) Support resiliency building through good communication
Strengths-based parents understand that although we must often tell children what to do or stop doing, listening is just as important, if not more so. Children need to express themselves and feel like the important people in their lives want to listen and understand them as this is critical to building competence. Its important to be ready to listen when a child wants to talk, to give them our full attention, to have regular conversations about what is going on in their daily lives and to ask them for ideas and opinions in family discussions. Effective communication involves listening even when we disagree and expressing a willingness to talk about any of the tough subjects and still provide comfort and assurance – being honest, respectful of their feelings and focused on the positive. As for the parent’s influence, model good communication by speaking in a way that is respectful and honest and that acknowledges the strengths of the child.

9) Widening the circle to develop responsibility, compassion and a social conscience
Outside of the immediate family, children need connections to multiple groups of friends, relatives, school staff, and community members. The more supportive and positive connections made, the more children develop a sense of connectedness to a larger community that values them as contributing members. By being in situations where they are able to contribute, children start to realize that others have needs and they can be part of the solution. If parents support their children in connecting to organizations that promote the same values, those values are reinforced and children learn that others expect them to play fair, be honest and loyal, be responsible and compassionate towards others.
WHAT DO CHILDREN NEED

Children require hope and the courage to follow their goals. These qualities help them develop the inner strength and resilience necessary to succeed in life despite the many challenges they will inevitably face. To develop a resilient mindset, children need more than just support and care. They need daily affirmation and encouragement, parents' active involvement in their lives, opportunities to participate in the community and experience a supportive neighbourhood. Children require boundaries, values, realistic expectations, and caring influences like schools. While there is no precise formula, there are common themes, issues and opportunities that all parents must provide to their children – placing the emphasis and energy of parenting on what it takes to raise resilient children. It is important to ask the following:

- Do my messages convey and teach respect?
- Am I putting relationship before directing?
- Am I fostering realistic expectations?
- Am I helping my child to problem-solve?
- Am I teaching empathy and compassion?
- Am I promoting self-discipline and control?
- Am I setting limits in ways that permit learning as opposed to resentment?
- Am I validating what my child says?
- Do my children know that I value their input?
- Do my children know how special they are to me?
- Do my children know that mistakes are part of the process of learning?
- Am I comfortable in acknowledging my own mistakes and apologizing to my child?

If I had my child to raise over
I’d build self-esteem first and the house later
I’d finger paint more and point the finger less
I would do less correcting and more connecting
I’d take my eyes off my watch and watch with my eyes

I would care to know less and know more to care
I’d take more hikes and fly more kites
I’d stop playing serious and seriously play
I would run through more fields and gaze more stars

I would do more hugging and less tugging
I’d see the oak tree in the acorn more often
I would be firm less often and affirm much more
I’d care less about the love of power
More about the power of love

A. Bronson Alcott
DIGGING DEEPER

To support this amazing journey with your children, the Resiliency Assessment Survey was designed to provide parents a way to understand resilience and its role in a child’s life. Based upon the responses to the questions in the survey, a “Summary Scoring Report” is created that outlines which developmental strengths your child can ‘build upon’ (strengths that they already understand and is regularly use), and which developmental strengths may need to be ‘built up’ – developed through purposeful parenting strategies.

The Resiliency Assessment Survey was designed to support a strengths-based parenting approach that will strengthen children’s ability to meet life’s challenges with thoughtfulness, confidence, purpose, and empathy:

- Providing parents with a practical understanding of what resilience is and its role in their child’s development.
- Moving the focus of parenting from managing behaviour or “perceived problems” to seeing the child as “at potential” with the innate capacity to navigate life’s challenges successfully.
- Supporting parents in exploring and ‘building upon’ the developmental strengths that their child understands and is able to draw upon effectively.
- Provides parents with a strengths-based ‘Roadmap’ to purposefully nurture a child’s innate strengths, social capacity and resilience in ways that prepares them to thrive.

SUGGESTED READING

- “Active Parenting of Teens: Parent’s Guide’ By Michael H. Popkin
- “How to Talk So Kids Will Listen And Listen So Kids Will Talk By Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish
- “Building Resilience in Children and Teens” By Ken Ginsburg
- “Parenting Without Power Struggles: Raising Joyful, Resilient Kids While Staying Cool, Calm and Connected” By Susan Stiffelman
- “Kids Can Cope: Parenting Resilient Children at Home and School” Published by The Psychology Foundation of Canada
- “Growing Up Resilient: Ways to Build Resilience in Children and Youth” Published by Centre for Addition & Mental Health
- “Hold Onto Your Kids: Why Parents Need to Matter More Than Peers” By Gordon Neufeld and Gabor Mate
- “Have a New Kid by Friday” By Kevin Leman
- “Raising Resilient Children: Fostering Strength, Hope and Optimism in Your Child” By Robert Brooks and Sam Gildstein
- Yes, Your Teenager is Crazy!: Loving Your Child Without Losing Your Mind” By Michael J. Bradley
- “Raising An Emotionally Intelligent Child: The Heart of Parenting” by John Gottman
- “Raise Your Child Without Raising Your Voice” By Sarah Radcliffe
- “Smart Parenting For Smart Kids: Nurturing Your Child’s True Potential” By Eileen Kennedy-Moore & Mark Lowenthal
- “Easy Ways to Teach Kids Hard Things: The Fun Way to Teach Your Children Important Life Lessons” Published by The Bookworm’s
- “Positive Discipline” Series By Jane Nelson