FCS2304

Strengthening Families: Parental Resilience[1]

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Parenting is a tremendous responsibility full of many moments of joy. But sometimes the rapid rate of a young child's growth and development can leave parents feeling a little overwhelmed. This Strengthening Families Series highlights six factors that promote positive parenting and protect against stressors and frustrations that can lead to harsh parenting: **Parental Resilience**, Social Connections, Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development, Concrete Support, Social and Emotional Competence, and Nurturing and Attachment. Each of these protective factors offers families and children some defense against distress. However, together they combine to create a solid foundation of knowledge, parenting skills, and support that can help families thrive during everyday circumstances as well as persevere during times of stress or crisis (1).

Overview

Parents who are able to cope with stressors and crises are considered resilient. Parental resilience is important because resilient parents are better able to solve problems, face challenges, and maintain a positive attitude (2). Resilient parents have better relationships with their children and are more consistent in managing their children's behavior, which leads to fewer emotional and behavioral problems (3). A parent's response to stressful situations can also have a positive impact on their child's development by modeling positive ways to handle life's adversities.

Parental Resilience

Parenting requires patience and understanding, which may be more difficult to achieve when the parent is experiencing financial, family, or health stressors. Everyone has personal strengths that contribute to his or her ability to cope.

External strengths may include supportive relationships with family and friends, and access to needed resources (4). You can learn more about these external strengths in the Social Connections and the Concrete Support portions of this Strengthening Families series.

Inner strengths are not just about those attributes you are born with, they are about skills and abilities that can be practiced and learned. Inner strengths may include spirituality and faith, humor, and flexibility (4). Additional inner strengths include coping, problem-solving, and stress-management skills.

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Inner Strength and Resilience, a Work in Progress

SPIRITUALITY AND FAITH

People who say they are spiritual or have a faith tradition tend to cope better with stressors in their lives. They are more likely to be a part of a spiritual or faith community that offers social connections, and they are more likely to be hopeful and optimistic. Spirituality / faith does not have to be associated with religious beliefs and practices (5). It can be any sacred connection between oneself and a higher power, which may include a deity, nature, the cosmos, or a meaningful human community.

HUMOR

Laughter *really* is good medicine. Research over the last several years has documented the healthful benefits of humor (6). Positive emotions like humor and laughter can help to reduce tension and can improve the ability to cope and problem-solve in difficult situations. Making light of challenging situations can allow you to look at things in a less threatening way, which can allow you to see the stresses in your life as more manageable. It also promotes healthy relationships with others who can provide important social connections in times of need.

FLEXIBILITY

Flexibility is the extent to which a person can adapt to changes and think about tasks or problems in new and different ways. Being flexible means that you understand that there is not "one" solution to a problem; there may be several options. If one solution doesn't work, it is not a sign of failure; rather, it means that you should adapt and try a different solution. Remaining flexible allows you to approach problems and stressors as challenges to overcome rather than obstacles that prevent you from achieving your goals.

PROBLEM SOLVING

Resolving problems before they become troubling can help reduce stress and improve parenting. Good problem solvers tend to approach problems as steps in a process. If you skip a step or complete them out of order, you may find that the problem gets worse or, at a minimum, stays the same. The steps include: 1) examining and understanding the problem, 2) developing a thoughtful plan, 3) carrying out the plan, and 4) checking the results. By following these steps in the problem-solving process, you can resolve problems before they become distressing.

COPING

There are at least two styles of coping: active and avoidant. An active style of coping is characterized by dealing with the problem head-on, seeking out information and resources that will allow you to master new skills or manage personal and interpersonal problems. This could include taking time to work through the problem-solving steps, talking with friends, taking a class, eating healthy, and exercising. An avoidant style of coping is characterized by strategies that seek to avoid the emotional consequences of distress. This could include avoiding the individual or situation, trying to think about something else, or using alcohol or other substances. Although avoidant strategies may be successful in reducing negative emotions in the short-run, an active style of coping is more likely to lower stress and improve well-being.

STRESS MANAGEMENT

Resilient people tend to engage in stress-relieving activities. One way to relieve stress is through healthy lifestyle choices (see EDIS publication FY577/FCS2077B *Stress Management: Preventing Stress through Lifestyle Management*)—for example, avoiding cigarettes, exercising regularly, eating sensibly, getting plenty of rest, and avoiding too much caffeine. Likewise, people who are able to overcome stress and problems feel that they have personal control over their own lives (see FY517/FCS2078 *Stress Management: Ways to Cope*). They approach life with a "can-do" attitude, are good problem-solvers, and use active coping strategies.

Summary

Through building resilience, parents and other family members will be better prepared to manage the inevitable challenges in life. Resilience not only benefits each family member, it also leads to better parenting and healthier child development. The strategies recommended here can help you further develop these positive attributes. With a positive mindset, you can become more resilient!

Resources and Information

- **Child Welfare Information Gateway: Protective Factors** – This site presents an overview of protective factors and serves as a clearinghouse for related resources. http://www.childwelfare.gov/can/factors/protective.cfm

- **Healthy Children (American Academy of Pediatrics)** – This site provides advice and resources from pediatricians on a broad range of parenting and child development topics. http://www.healthychildren.org

- **Just in Time Parenting** – This Cooperative Extension site provides a variety of resources on parenting and allows parents to sign up for "age-paced" newsletters that provide relevant information as your child ages. http://www.parentinginfo.org

- **Parenting 24/7** – This site, created by University of Illinois Cooperative Extension, is an excellent resource for information related to children and families. http://parenting247.org

- **University of Florida Extension Publications** (**EDIS**) – The EDIS website is a comprehensive, single-source repository of all current UF/IFAS numbered peer-reviewed publications. UF/IFAS academic departments develop and maintain a collection of publications available for universal free distribution on the World Wide Web and through the Florida Cooperative Extension Service County Offices and Research and Education Centers statewide. Publications that address the needs of children in Florida are accessible to all at http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/topics/families/children.html.

- **Zero to Three Parenting Resources** – The "parenting resources" section of this website has practical resources for parents. http://www.zerotothree.org/about-us/funded-projects/parenting-resources

Endnotes

(1) This work is based on the framework developed by the Center for the Study of Social Policy, with more information available at http://www.cssp.org/reform/strengthening-families.

(2) Center for the Study of Social Policy. (2008). *The Five Protective Factors*. Retrieved from http://www.strengthening-ingfamilies.net/index.php/main_pages/protective_factors.

(3) Bynum, M.S., & Brody, G.H. (2005). Coping behaviors, parenting, and perceptions of children's internalization and externalizing problems in rural African-American mothers. *Family Relations, 54*, 58–71.

(4) Henderson, N. Benard, B., & Sharp-Light, N. (2007). *Resiliency in action: Practical ideas for overcoming risks and building strengths in youth, families, and communities.* California: Resiliency in Action, Inc.

(5) Paloutzian, R.F., & Park, C.L. (2005). *Handbook of the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*. New York: Guilford Press.

(6) Martin, R.A. (2007). *The Psychology of Humor*. Burlington, MA: Academic Press.