

"Brooks and Goldstein tell us the importance of bouncing back from the big and little adversities of life, and they give us the skills to do that."

—Myrna Shure, Ph.D., author of *Raising a Thinking Child*

NURTURING RESILIENCE IN OUR CHILDREN



ANSWERS TO THE MOST IMPORTANT
PARENTING QUESTIONS

Robert Brooks, Ph.D., and Sam Goldstein, Ph.D.

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*Answers to the Most Important
Parenting Questions*

Robert Brooks, Ph.D., and
Sam Goldstein, Ph.D.

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Preface

In our first book, *Raising Resilient Children*, we set out to synthesize and present in a practical way a large volume of research about the qualities of resilience and the abilities of some children to face and overcome great adversity. We emphasized the importance of parents nurturing a resilient mindset in children from birth, a mindset that would help all youngsters deal more effectively with the many challenges that they might face. We characterized resilient children as being capable of dealing with stress and pressure and coping effectively with everyday challenges. They are optimistic and bounce back from disappointment, adversity, or trauma. They are capable of developing clear and realistic goals. They have learned to solve problems that are within their ability to solve and are confident that patience and persistence will lead to successful outcomes. Resilient children relate well to others, treat themselves and others with respect, and, very importantly, while they feel a sense of control of their lives, they do not possess a strong need to direct, control, or manipulate the lives of others.

Following the publication of *Raising Resilient Children*, we began to receive an increasing number of questions about resilience from parents, educators, and other professionals, particularly at our conferences and on our websites. We collected these questions and also reflected upon questions about resilience we had received in the past. We realized that although many of the topics and issues housed in these questions were discussed in our first book, in many cases the questions required more specific answers as to how the qualities of resilience, the mindset of parents capable of fostering resilience, and the attitudes and skills of resilient children impact on a variety of everyday life experiences within families, in the community, and at school. The many questions we received were the catalyst for writing this book.

We have written this book in a style that permits you to read and reread our words in different ways. In each chapter we have provided a set of questions that represent common themes in the inquiries parents have made con-

cerning our work with families and the qualities of resilience. We have attempted to place the questions together in a logical framework so that by the close of each chapter the important guideposts, obstacles, and strategies for each resilient quality will have been presented and discussed.

Children come into this world with their own unique temperaments. Current research has suggested that qualities within children and qualities between children and their environments, as well as the characteristics of the general environment, all play a role in shaping a resilient mindset. Our focus is to examine primarily the middle set of factors, namely, those between child and parent, between child and teacher, between children and the world around them. Parents and other caregivers can strongly influence whether children develop the characteristics and mindset associated with resilience or whether they become burdened by low self-worth, self-doubt, and a diminished sense of hope. Developing a resilient mindset is not a luxury but an essential component of a successful future for our children, our culture, and our world. It is our hope that the ideas offered in this book will make a positive difference in your life and the lives of your children.

[R]ecent studies continue to corroborate the importance of a relatively small set of global factors associated with resilience. These include connections to competent, caring adults in the family and community, cognitive and self-regulation skills, positive views of self, and motivation to be effective in the environment.

ANN S. MASTEN

Raising children . . . is about identifying and nurturing their strongest qualities, what they own and are best at, and helping them find their niches in which they can best live out these strengths.

MARTIN SELIGMAN

We are linked by our resilience, that inbred, evolutionary ability to live and grow and love against all odds.

J. NOZIPO MARAIRE

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The Dreams and Wishes of Parents

Weaving the Threads of Resilience

Question

People always seem to talk about the “good old days.” When I watch old television programs like “Father Knows Best” or “Ozzie and Harriet,” it seems that being a parent was so much easier then. I know that these are just television shows and that they probably exaggerate how simple things were, but I am wondering if being a parent is more difficult today than in my parents’ or grandparents’ time?

Answer

Although shows such as “Father Knows Best” and “Ozzie and Harriet” were just television programs, they do seem to capture a less complicated or complex time of parenting. While we believe the dreams and wishes of parents were likely the same in our parents’ and grandparents’ time as in ours, there is the sense that it is more difficult today to be an effective parent and to feel confident that our everyday acts of parenting will be successful in reaching the goals we desire for our children. Whether the vantage point is fifty years ago or today, all parents hope that their children will be happy, successful, and prepared to enter the world of adults possessing the inner strength to deal day after day with the challenges and demands they encounter. Though growing up has always presented its share of challenges and pressures for children, we believe there are many more challenges facing children today than fifty years ago. In our fast-paced, stress-filled world, the number of youngsters facing adversity and the number of adversities they face continue to increase dramatically. No child is immune. Even children

fortunate to not encounter significant adversity in their lives or to be burdened by intense stress or anxiety experience the pressures around them and the expectations placed upon them.

Though growing up has always presented its share of challenges and pressures for children, we believe there are many more challenges facing children today than fifty years ago.

We believe that as a culture becomes more technologically complex, an increased burden is placed upon children as well as parents to adapt to and cope with such systems. In a way it is a mixed blessing. Our children today have dramatically greater technology at their fingertips from information resources to medical support. In this regard, they are better off than their counterparts in past generations. Yet there is a price to pay. That price we believe is increased stress and pressure and the greater need for children at younger ages to develop coping strategies to master the stresses in their lives.

Some might argue that the solution lies in making the world a simpler place for our children. However, while making major changes in our children's environment may be an admirable goal, it has significant limitations, not the least of which are the many forces impinging on children beyond the control of parents. Instead, what seems to make the greatest sense is for parents to focus on what they do have some control over, namely, helping children develop the skills to deal with and, hopefully, change for the better the world we have created. The centerpiece of these skills is resilience. If we want to raise resilient children we must avoid expending all of our energy on attempting to change the world; rather we must begin by changing what we do with our children. We can no longer afford to assume that if our children don't face significant stress they will be unburdened as they transition into adult life.

Yes, we do believe today's children are growing up in a more complex, uncertain time than past generations. However, we are optimistic that these greater complexities will not lead parents to throw up their hands in frustration wondering what they can do. Rather, they will be prompted to search for guideposts to develop a resilient mindset in their children. Such a mindset will serve their children well in any environment.

Question

It seems that I am hearing the word resilient more and more. Since the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, many people have used the word to describe the United States. A sportscaster once referred to a baseball team as resilient since they had many injuries but were still in first place. Then I heard a newscaster call a country resilient after an earthquake that destroyed many buildings and led to many casualties. Finally, I saw a news feature about a boy who was fighting cancer. The reporter said he was such a resilient kid. So what exactly does resilient mean?

Answer

It does seem that the word *resilient* is heard more and more. Actually, the word was originally used to apply to physical properties and is defined in the dictionary as “springing back or rebounding.” It is the act of returning to an original form or position after being bent, compressed, or stretched. In the last twenty to twenty-five years, the meaning of *resilience* has been broadened to include a psychological dimension, that is, to describe people who “bounced back” from stress, trauma, or adversity. All of the examples you mentioned capture adverse situations in which people have responded in a positive way despite stress, injury, or adversity.

Resilience should be understood as a vital ingredient in the process of parenting all children, a process that directs our interactions as we strengthen our children’s ability to meet life’s challenges and pressures with confidence and perseverance.

Researchers studying resilience have typically focused on youngsters undergoing great risk such as the boy you mentioned with cancer. They have examined such risk factors as children being exposed to abuse, neglect, poverty, or mental illness in a parent. These are all worthy areas of study. However, we believe that the concept of resilience should be expanded to embrace not only children experiencing these and other hardships but to every youngster and that it should define a process of parenting that is essential if we are to prepare our children for success in all areas of their future lives. Resilience should be understood as a vital ingredient in the pro-

cess of parenting all children, a process that directs our interactions as we strengthen our children's ability to meet life's challenges and pressures with confidence and perseverance. The principles involved in raising resilient children can serve as guideposts as we teach children about friendships, school, community, and dealing with challenges and mistakes, as well as meeting responsibilities.

Some may contend that our expanded application of the concept of resilience is so broad that it encompasses almost all aspects of raising children. We would not disagree, but we would see this more comprehensive definition as a positive phenomenon rather than as a watering down of an important concept. The development of resilience in our children is one of the most important tasks of parenting.

Question

In your lectures you talk about the importance of developing a resilient mindset in children. What does mindset really mean and what are the main characteristics of a resilient mindset? What impact does a mindset have in how a child actually behaves?

Answer

It seems that just as the word *resilience* is being increasingly used by many people, so too is the word *mindset*. When we write about a mindset, we are referring to a set of ideas, beliefs, attitudes, skills, and assumptions, all of which guide our behavior relative to a specific topic or issue. In this case we are referring to these qualities as they relate to resilience. Often we are not aware of or reflect upon the components of our mindset or how our mindset actually influences our behavior. Yet, as psychologists we believe strongly that our thoughts, feelings, and attitudes combine as powerful predictors in determining how we behave and ultimately deal with everyday life. In our experience it is not unusual to find that many parents have not thought about or challenged the assumptions they hold about parenting and their children's behavior.

As an example, one mother with whom we worked, had a temperamentally difficult-to-manage five-year-old daughter. The mother's mindset was that her daughter was acting difficult on purpose, and the mother told us that she was convinced that for some reason the girl was attempting to get

her angry. Given this view, the mother reacted by becoming increasingly punitive, prompting the girl to feel unloved and resentful. Not surprisingly, the result was the establishment of a negative cycle between this mother and her daughter.

When we interviewed this girl, her mindset was that her mother was unfair and didn't love her. It wasn't until we helped change this mother's assumptions about her daughter by discussing the different temperaments in children and how her daughter was not placed on this earth to make her life miserable (a belief that mother had expressed in a moment of frustration), that the mother could accept our recommendations for working with a temperamentally difficult youngster. Without realizing it, this mother's assumption about her daughter's behavior was actually prompting her to respond in ways that worsened their relationship and lessened her daughter's ability to be resilient. Once this mother's mindset and subsequent behaviors changed, so did her daughter's in a positive way.

Another illustration that relates directly to the mindset of resilient individuals pertains to how children understand the reasons for the mistakes they make. Children who believe that a mistake is a sign of failure or inadequacy and something that is not easily corrected are likely to avoid mistakes at all costs or become increasingly helpless and unhappy in the face of failure. Such children may attempt to mask their feelings of failure by saying the task is stupid and quitting, or by becoming class clowns or class bullies. In contrast, another child dealing with the very same mistakes and issues may possess a decidedly different mindset, believing that mistakes are challenges to overcome rather than failures to avoid. This child's mindset will direct him or her to seek assistance from others and figure out ways of solving the problem.

A resilient child is an emotionally healthy child equipped to successfully confront challenges and bounce back from setbacks.

Resilient children possess a mindset that is strikingly different from children who are not resilient and who have not been successful or able to overcome adversity. As parents understand the features of this mindset, they can help to nurture and reinforce it in their children. A resilient mind-

set is what we hope for all children. A resilient child is an emotionally healthy child equipped to successfully confront challenges and bounce back from setbacks. As we will discuss in our answers to questions in subsequent chapters, children possessing a resilient mindset feel special and appreciated. They have learned to set realistic goals and expectations. They develop the ability to solve problems and have confidence in their decisions. This leads them to view mistakes or obstacles as challenges rather than stresses. Children possessing a resilient mindset rely on productive coping strategies. Their self-concept is filled with images of strength and competence. They have developed effective interpersonal skills in their relationships with both children and adults. They are comfortable in seeking out assistance and believe that there are adults in their lives who care about and are available to them.

Our focus has been on how parents through day-in and day-out interaction with their children can develop and reinforce this “product” that we are calling a resilient mindset. The more parents are aware of the power of this mindset in their own lives and the lives of their children, the more they can make appropriate changes and become more effective parents.

Question

I heard you speak at a parenting workshop and was intrigued that as parents our mindset plays a large role in fostering resilience in our children. It's something I hadn't really thought about before, but I realize what an important concept it is. What are the characteristics of the mindset of parents who are more likely to nurture resilience in their children? And, as important, is it something that can be learned? One of the problems I see is that if I think too much about mindsets I might begin to analyze every assumption or every behavior of mine or of my children. I worry that if I do too much thinking about my parenting, I might become paralyzed in my interactions with my kids. Yet, I do want to increase my skills in understanding my mindset and that of my kids.

Answer

You raise some important questions. As we have noted, many caring, well-meaning parents have not thought about how our assumptions, including how we view ourselves, our parenting skills, and the behaviors of our children, really do determine the quality of a parent-child relationship. We