

RAISING RESILIENT KIDS

WHEN kids are resilient they're more adaptable, more curious, more motivated. They're better able to bounce back from difficulties and challenges. And the fact is there's never been a more challenging time.

The lockdown is asking a lot of our children. Here's how to help them cope with courage and ease

BY KIM ARENDESE

There's the stress of being cooped up during lockdown, the pressure of keeping up with schoolwork at home and the fear and anxiety brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic.

It could be argued that teaching your child resilience is more important than ever. We face an uncertain future, and equipping them with a skill that will help them navigate this is invaluable.

"These are unusual and trying times, not only in South Africa but in the world," says Jodi Lord, a counsellor specialising in play therapy, from Cape Town. "Change is hard, and a resilient child will feel less fearful and tackle challenges with curiosity and bravery."

Thankfully, resilience is something that can be taught and developed, adds Anita Prag, a clinical psychologist from Cape Town. "To endure a hardship and overcome it develops our ability to see that there's hope even when it's not obvious."

Here's how you can help your child learn this all-important skill.

1 LET THEM MAKE MISTAKES

"Too many people have been taught that failure is wrong, which diminishes how we feel about ourselves – we think we're not worthy, not lovable or bad human beings for making a mistake," Prag says.

When your child makes a mistake, it's actually one of the best times to teach them that failure is an opportunity to learn. Remind them that a mistake allows for brain building, suggests Dr Judy Willis, a US-based neurologist with an interest in education.

"Encourage them to correct their mistake and explain that when you do this your brain builds new wiring that guides you to make a better choice next time."

Keep the discussion light and try to bring in humour. "It's important to ensure they know they're loved by you despite the outcome," Lord says.

Talk about past mistakes – theirs as well as your own – and discuss how you felt at the time and how the problem was dealt with. This will help them see they have a choice in how they tackle a problem.

2 ENCOURAGE DELAYED GRATIFICATION

A large part of resilience is understanding that you can't always have what you want as soon as you want it, says Dr Rangan Chatterjee, a British physician and author of the book *The Stress Solution*.

"It's an important concept to pass on in the age of Spotify, Netflix and Uber. Without the ability to defer pleasure and reward, our kids are losing an important skill for their wellbeing," he says.

A good way to teach this to kids is playing board games as a family, he suggests. "These require impulse control, turn-taking and mental flexibility. They exercise the prefrontal cortex – the rational part of the brain involved in decision-making – emotional regulation and resilience. Board games are also a good way to model resilience by being a good loser."

Other ways to encourage delayed gratification include learning a musical instrument or sport, listening to whole albums instead of skipping from track to track and watching a TV show one episode a week instead of binge-watching.

3 USE THE STEPLADDER APPROACH TO HELP WITH OVERWHELMING FEELINGS

It's easy to adopt black and white thinking when looking at solutions to a problem or challenge, says Australian psychologist Karen Young, author of the mental wellness blog *Hey Sigmund*.

"The choices can seem like only two – face it head-on or avoid it at all costs. But there's a third option, and that is to move gradually towards it while feeling supported and with a certain amount of control."

Young suggests a technique called the stepladder, commonly used in therapy to gently expose kids to a feared situation. Instead of a situation being overwhelming, it becomes tolerable as the brain is slowly exposed to new experiences.

Use an example to explain the stepladder concept to your child. It could be imagining that a friend fears heights, which would make climbing a tree difficult but also means they'd miss out on a lot of fun.

Ask what they think the friend could do. Could they get used to it by climbing bit by bit over a few days, going a little higher every day? See what solutions your child sug-

4 TEACH THEM TO PROBLEM-SOLVE

Give your child the chance to figure out what works and what doesn't, suggests Lynn Lyons, a US psychotherapist and author of *Anxious Kids, Anxious Parents: 7 Ways To Stop the Worry Cycle and Raise Courageous and Independent Children*.

She suggests asking your child these questions when they're confronted with a problem:

- **What would [someone they see as capable] do?**
- **What's worked before?**
- **Give as many ideas as you can in two minutes. Even silly ones!**

Turning "why" questions into "how" questions also helps kids focus on solutions. So instead of asking, "Why aren't you getting anywhere with that school project?", ask, "How can you make progress with that project a little bit every day?" ■

gests – this analysis itself strengthens connections in the prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain that's needed to bring calm during anxiety.

Once your child has grasped the concept, explain that it can be used to tackle problems they find overwhelming. Tell them that when it happens you'll talk it through with them and help them figure out how to break challenges down into more manageable parts.

FOSTERING A GROWTH MINDSET

The term growth mindset was coined 30 years ago by Carol Dweck, a professor of psychology at Stanford University in the US, after she became interested in



students' attitudes about failure. She noticed that while some students bounced back from setbacks, others were crushed by the

smallest of them. In one of her many studies, Dweck offered four-year-olds a choice of either redoing an easy puzzle or trying a different, more challenging one.

Most children with a fixed mindset (a belief that character, intelligence and creative ability can't be changed) chose the easy puzzle to affirm their ability, while those with a growth mindset (the belief you can get the desired result with the right attitude, strategy and practice) chose the challenge of something new.

Here are some examples of how the internal dialogue differs between a fixed mindset and a growth mindset, and it's resilience that makes the difference.

Fixed mindset: When I fail, I'm no good.
Growth mindset: When I fail, I learn.

Fixed mindset: I compare myself to others.
Growth mindset: I focus on my improvement.

Fixed mindset: It's good enough.
Growth mindset: Is this really my best work?

Fixed mindset: I just don't have a mathematical brain.
Growth mindset: I'm going to train my brain in maths.

MORE TIPS ON BUILDING RESILIENCE

- "An authoritative parenting style that's warm and supportive but sets consistent limits in a loving way is proved to be beneficial in instilling resilience," says Jodi Lord, a counsellor specialising in play therapy, from Cape Town.
- If you hear your child say something negative about themselves or their abilities, switch their

comment to a positive one. They might say, "I can't do this!" Counter with, "You mean you can't do it yet. That's okay – you're still figuring it out."

■ Help kids – especially teens – to keep things in perspective and understand that negative experiences are simply part of life and don't mean everything is negative, says Claire Kingwill, an educational psychologist from Cape Town.