

# Strengthening the Human Spirit.

## The Road to Resilience

Building children, families and communities which are capable, resourceful and resilient



How do people deal with difficult events that change their lives? The death of a loved one, loss of a job, serious illness, terrorist attacks and other traumatic events: these are all examples of very challenging life experiences. Many people react to such circumstances with a flood of strong emotions and a sense of uncertainty.

Yet people generally adapt well over time to life-changing situations and stressful conditions. What enables them to do so? It involves resilience, an ongoing process

that requires time and effort and engages people in taking a number of steps.

This workshop is intended to provide a guide to those taking their own road to resilience. The information within describes resilience and some factors that affect how people deal with hardship.

Much of what this workshop focuses on is developing and using a personal strategy for enhancing resilience.

### Research?

The International Resilience Project with participants from 30 countries looked at the issue of Resilience in children.

A total of 589 children participated as well as their families and care givers; 48 per cent were girls and 52 per cent boys. Just over half the children were aged from 9 to 11 years, the remainder were aged six years or under.

The findings suggest that every country in the study is drawing on a common set of resilience factors to promote resilience in their children. Adults and older children use more resilience promoting supports, inner strengths and interpersonal skills than younger children in promoting resilience in the children. Overall, less than half the respondents are using resilience

promoting behavior and even those respondents vary individually in use of the factors, largely depending on the situation. Socio-economic level contributed very little to variations in responses.

In promoting resilience, any work with children must similarly be in the contexts of their families, their schools, their communities, and the larger society.

### Three sources of resilience

To overcome adversities, children draw from three sources of resilience features labeled: **I HAVE, I AM, I CAN**. What they draw from each of the three sources may be described as follows:

#### I HAVE

- People around me I trust and who love me, no matter what
- People who set limits for me so I know when to stop before there is danger or trouble
- People who show me how to do things right by the way they do things
- People who want me to learn to do things on my own
- People who help me when I am sick, in danger or need to learn

#### I AM

- A person people can like and love
- Glad to do nice things for others and show my concern
- Respectful of myself and others
- Willing to be responsible for what I do
- Sure things will be all right

#### I CAN

- Talk to others about things that frighten me or bother me
- Find ways to solve problems that I face
- Control myself when I feel like doing something not right or dangerous
- Figure out when it is a good time to talk to someone or to take action
- Find someone to help me when I need it

**What Is Resilience?**

Resilience is the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or even significant sources of stress -- such as family and relationship problems, serious health problems, or workplace and financial stressors. It means "bouncing back" from difficult experiences.

Research has shown that resilience is ordinary, not extraordinary. People commonly demonstrate resilience. One example is the response of many Americans to the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks and individuals' efforts to rebuild their lives.

Being resilient does not mean that a person doesn't experience difficulty or distress. Emotional pain and sadness are common in people who have suffered major adversity or trauma in their lives. In fact, the road to resilience is likely to involve considerable emotional distress.

Resilience is not a trait that people either have or do not have. It involves behaviors, thoughts, and actions that can



be learned and developed in anyone.

**THE LANGUAGE OF RESILIENCE**

Children facing such situations often feel lonely, fearful, and vulnerable. These feelings are less overwhelming for children who have the skills, attitudes, beliefs, and resources of resilience. But, before we can begin to promote resilience, we need a shared language with which to describe, illustrate, and explain it. The concept of resilience is relatively new for describing the behavior of people. Some languages do not have a word for it. Castellano (Spanish), for example, has no comparable use of the word 'resilience', but instead, uses the term, *la defensa ante la adversidad* (defense against adversity). The same idea can

be described by using another word or term. Most people around the world understand the idea of overcoming adversity with courage, skills and faith.

The vocabulary of resilience is more than a set of words that will allow us to talk about this emerging concept. It is a set of tools to use in promoting resilience. Armed with the language necessary to recognize resilience when they see it, adults can help children identify resilient behavior more easily in themselves and others. They can use the vocabulary to reinforce those feelings and beliefs that support resilience and to guide their own and their

children's behavior. The more concepts they understand, the greater their options for acting in ways that help children meet the crises in their lives with strength and hope. Children who learn the vocabulary are better able to recognize resilience in themselves and others. They become increasingly aware of how to promote it.

The I HAVE, I AM and I CAN categories are drawn from the findings of the International Resilience Project which identified 36 qualitative factors that contribute to resilience. These can be divided into three major categories, each consisting of five parts.

**Strengthening the human spirit**

At different ages, children rely more or less heavily on their I HAVE, I AM, and I CAN resources. As children grow, they increasingly shift their reliance from outside supports (I HAVE) to their own skills (I CAN), while continually building and strengthening their personal attitudes and feelings (I AM).

Just as the resilience skills used by children vary at different ages, so must parents and other care givers vary their resilience-promoting language and behavior to match the child's developmental stage. What follows is a stage-by-stage guide to promoting resilience in children.

Children develop over time at different rates and so some information may be appropriate for younger or older children not necessarily within their chronological age group. One common factor for all

age groups, however, is that the child is the test for whether or not you are promoting resilience faster than he or she can handle, whether the child is comfortable with what you are doing, understands what you are doing, or is learning what you are teaching and encouraging.

The response of the child is the touchstone for the effectiveness of what the parent or other care giver is doing to promote resilience in the child.



**I HAVE**

The I HAVE factors are the external supports and resources that promote resilience. Before the child is aware of who she is ('I AM') or what she can do ('I CAN'), she needs external supports and resources to develop the feelings of safety and security that lay the foundation, that are the core, for developing resilience. These supports continue to be important throughout childhood. The resilient child says ...

**I HAVE**

- Trusting relationships
  - Parents, other family members, teachers, and friends who love and accept the child. Children of all ages need unconditional love from their parents and primary care givers, but they need love and emotional support from other adults as well. Love and support from others can sometimes compensate for a lack of unconditional love from parents and care givers.
- Structure and rules at home
  - Parents who provide clear rules and routines, expect the child to follow them, and can rely on the child to do so. Rules and routines include tasks the child is expected to perform. The limits and consequences of behavior are clearly stated and understood. When rules are broken, the child is helped to understand what he or she did wrong, is encouraged to tell his or her side of what happened, is punished when needed, and is then forgiven and reconciled with the adult. When the child follows the rules and routines, he or she is praised and thanked. The parents do not harm the child in punishment, and no one else is allowed to harm the child.
- Role models
  - Parents, other adults, older siblings, and peers who act in ways which show the child desired and acceptable behavior, both within the family and toward outsiders. These people demonstrate how to do things, such as dress or ask for information, and encourage the child to imitate them. They are also models of morality and may introduce the child to the customs of their religion.
- Encouragement to be autonomous
  - Adults, especially parents, who encourage the child to do things on her own and to seek help as needed, help the child to be autonomous. They praise the child when he or she shows initiative and autonomy, and help the child, perhaps through practice or conversation, to do things independently. Adults are aware of the child's temperament, as well as their own, so they can adjust the speed and degree to which they encourage autonomy in their child.
- Access to health, education, welfare, and security services
  - The child, independently or through the family, can rely on consistent services to meet the needs the family cannot fulfill — hospitals and doctors, schools and teachers, social services, and police and fire protection, or the equivalent of these services.



**I AM**

The I AM factors are the child's internal, personal strengths. These are feelings, attitudes, and beliefs within the child. The resilient child says ...

**I AM**

- Lovable and my temperament is appealing
  - The child is aware that people like and love him or her. The child does endearing things for others that help make him or her lovable. The child is sensitive to the moods of others and knows what to expect from them. The child strikes an appropriate balance between exuberance and quietness when responding to others.
- Loving, empathic, and altruistic
  - The child loves other people and expresses that love in many ways. He or she cares about what happens to others and expresses that caring through actions and words. The child feels the discomfort and suffering of others and wants to do something to stop or share the suffering or to give comfort.
- Proud of myself
  - The child knows he or she is an important person and feels proud of who he or she is and what he or she can do and achieve. The child does not let others belittle or degrade him or her. When the child has problems in life, confidence and self-esteem help sustain him or her.
- Autonomous and responsible
  - The child can do things on his or her own and accept the consequences of the behavior. There is the feeling that what he or she does makes a difference in how things develop and the child accepts that responsibility. The child understands the limits of his or her control over events and recognizes when others are responsible.
- Filled with hope, faith, and trust
  - The child believes that there is hope for him or her and that there are people and institutions that can be trusted. The child feels a sense of right and wrong, believes right will win, and wants to contribute to this. The child has confidence and faith in morality and goodness, and may express this as a belief in God or higher spiritual being.

**Examples of what parents and care givers can do**

When they promote resilience in the child aged four to seven, parents and care givers:

- continue to help the child learn to recognize and label his or her own feelings as well as those of others;
- continue to help the child become increasingly aware of his or her own temperament (for example, how shy or outgoing, cautious or thrill-seeking he or she is) as well as the temperaments of the adults in the child's life;
- gradually expose the child to adversities or prepare the child for them by talking, reading books, and identifying and discussing resilience factors that may be helpful;
- encourage the child to demonstrate empathy and caring, to be pleasant and do nice things for others;
- encourage the child to use communication and problem-solving skills to resolve interpersonal problems or to seek help with them;
- communicate with the child, discussing, sharing, and reporting on the days' events, ideas, observations, and feelings;

- help the child begin to accept responsibility for his or her own behavior and to understand that his or her actions have consequences.



**I CAN**

behave otherwise in a harmful manner.

The I CAN factors are the child's social and interpersonal skills. Children learn these skills by interacting with others and from those who teach them. The resilient child says ...

**I CAN**

- **Communicate**
  - The child is able to express thoughts and feelings to others. He or she can listen to what others are saying and be aware of what they are feeling. The child can reconcile differences and is able to understand and act on the results of the communication.
- **Problem solve**
  - The child can assess the nature and scope of a problem, what he or she needs to do to resolve it, and what help is needed from others. The child can negotiate solutions with others and may find creative or humorous solutions. He or she has the persistence to stay with a problem until it is indeed solved.
- **Manage my feelings and impulses**
  - The child can recognize his or her feelings, give the emotions names, and express them in words and behavior that do not violate the feelings and rights of others or of himself or herself. The child can also manage the impulse to hit, run away, damage property, or
- **Gauge the temperament of myself and others**
  - The child has insight into his or her own temperament (how active, impulsive, and risk-taking or quiet, reflective, and cautious he or she is, for example) and, also, into the temperament of others. This helps the child know how fast to move into action, how much time is needed to communicate, and how much he or she can accomplish in various situations.
- **Seek trusting relationships**
  - The child can find someone — a parent, teacher, other adult, or same-age friend — to ask for help, to share feelings and concerns, to explore ways to solve personal and interpersonal problems, or to discuss conflicts in the family.

Each of the I HAVE, I AM, and I CAN factors suggests numerous actions children and their care givers can take to promote resilience. No one child or parent will use the entire pool of resilience factors, nor need they. Some use many; others use few. However, the larger the pool of possibilities before them, the more options children, parents, and care givers have and the more flexible they can be in selecting appropriate responses to a given situation

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## CONTINUING THE JOURNEY

*To help summarize several of the main points in this workshop, think of resilience as similar to taking a raft trip down a river. On a river, you may encounter rapids, turns, slow water, and shallows. As in life, the changes you experience affect you differently along the way. In traveling the river, it helps to have knowledge about it and past experience in dealing with it. Your journey should be guided by a plan, a strategy that you consider likely to work well for you. Perseverance and trust in your ability to work your way around boulders and other obstacles are important. You can gain courage and insight by successfully navigating your way through white water. Trusted companions who accompany you on the journey can be especially helpful for dealing with rapids, upstream currents, and other difficult stretches of the river.*

*You can climb out to rest alongside the river. But to get to the end of your journey, you need to get back in the raft and continue.*

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