

# Ten Ways to Foster Resilience in Young Children – Teaching Kids to “Bounce Back”

*Discover how caregivers can use activities to assist young children in building resilience.*

**Karen Petty**

Resilience has often been defined as the ability to bounce back in times of adversity and to develop in a positive way when faced with setbacks (Dillen, 2012; Masten, 2009). Children routinely show high amounts of resilience mostly because of temperament and a built-in sense of autonomy. Children are able to overcome adversity to bounce back before social and emotional harm is done, even after being exposed to extreme risks. Dr. Ken Ginsburg, a contemporary resilience expert, wrote that resilience may be the fourth “R” and is as important to teach as “Reading”, “Riting”, and “Rithmetic” (2006; 2011). As we teach and provide care for young children, there is always opportunity to assist them in becoming more resilient by looking at research in resilience and finding the best practices.

**Resilience may be the 4th “R”.**

## What Does the Research Say?

Most children are emotionally buoyant and are able to bounce back quickly and live resilient lives, even when they grow up in families with extreme challenges that include loss and separation (Masten, 2011; Petty, 2009b) such as the case of children of parents who are in the military (Petty, 2009a). The following research studies represent examples of ways that children who have been exposed to extreme hardships have found ways to show emotional hardiness or competence later in life.

Masten and Garmezy studied African-American children who faced poverty but seemed to have an internal locus of control or self-efficacy that was surprising to their teachers (Garmezy, 1981; Masten, 2009). Interestingly they found that when we put forth our best efforts in caring for our youth (or schooling them), resilience can be fostered against any odds.

Shiner and Masten (2012) tracked 205 children to early adulthood and then young adulthood where they looked at “Big Five personality traits” (p. 507) such as being:

- extraverted or outgoing and active
- neurotic or fearful and distrusting
- conscientious or careful and attentive
- agreeable
- open

It was found that children have the potential to change, “both naturally and through intervention” (p. 526) as they enter adulthood and are faced with hardship and stress.

Michael Ungar looked at resilience from the perspective of the positive adaptations that social services can provide to children who experienced maltreatment, trauma, abuse, and neglect and found that their ability to bounce back is often associated with their own personal coping strategies as well as the community services that are provided such as schools and care giving (2013).

In a grounded qualitative study, Christine Eppler (2008) explored the resilient traits of 12 school-agers who had experienced the death of a parent and found that there were certain themes present in their stories about their grief. They identified feelings such as sadness, anger, and fear, and happiness as well as themes of family support and extended support. Eppler discovered that

the use of a strength-based lens in order to foster resilience in children is necessary in order to honor their feelings and build on their strengths.

In every study (above) where children had positive outcomes when living in dire circumstances, they received support or were surrounded by protective factors such as the following to foster resilience. We can use resilience literature and theory to build emotional hardiness if we are aware of the basic ways that kids can be taught to keep bouncing (Benard, 2004; Shiner & Masten, 2012).

## Ten Ways to Foster Resilience

Working with children can be challenging, especially when they face enduring hardships. For children with low amounts of resilience, it can be extremely difficult to bounce back or remain buoyant in challenging times. The following ways to foster resilience are found in literature based on resilience theory and best practices.

### #1: Build Empathy

Help children to build resilience by becoming more understanding or able to see the view of someone else by using children’s literature (Petty, 2012). After reading a story such as *The Three Billy Goats Gruff* with younger children, talk about the characters and ask children to tell how they might feel if they were a particular character. Talk about feelings such as scared, angry, frustrated, hungry, lonely, sad, etc. Then have them change the story by having each “character” tell another “character” how they feel. For example, “I don’t want to go across the bridge ‘cause I’m scared.”, said the littlest Billy goat. Ask the children to



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*Children’s literature can be used to build empathy with characters and classmates.*

reenact the story, adding the phrase, “‘cause I’m feeling...” to each character. When children begin to see that other children have some of the same feelings that they do, they may begin to identify those feelings in others and experience compassion, perspective taking, and/or empathy.

### #2: Identify a Go-To Person

Children need at least one caring adult with whom they can attach to offset the challenges they face each day. This person is often their teacher or care provider. By mentoring or coaching a child who is building resilience, our actions go a long way in ensuring success. Intentionally care for children who lack the ability to rebound quickly from challenges

or adversities by spending time just being there for them or simply noticing them (Ginsburg, 2006). When caring for large groups, this takes much practice to become the go-to person when under-resilient children need you. Set aside a few minutes each day to “check-in” with them: “I saw that you were having difficulty building a tower (or writing your name) earlier. Can I help?” For social skill building, phrases such as, “When you get stuck or don’t know what to do, remember that I’m here for you.”

### #3: Listen

Noah, a caregiver, recently reminded me there is a difference in listening and hearing. Caregivers

often say, “I’m listening.”, but they may not be really hearing what the child is saying. Noah advises us to make eye contact, move in toward the child at a distance that is comfortable for you and the child, and really listen (hear). Use phrases such as, “I’ve got a whole minute to listen to you and I really want to hear your story.” or, “Sometimes I go too fast so ask me to slow down and hear your words.” These simple requests to pay positive attention to young children can go a long way in building resilience by acknowledgement that what she has to say is important to you. Intentional caring by listening is a wonderful protective factor for young children building their resilience.

**Children’s mistakes  
can be growth  
experiences.**

#### #4: Learn to “See Next”

Help kids “see next” which simply means to look forward, using past experiences as lessons but future experiences as opportunities to bounce better/become more resilient. Set goals and make plans with the kids in your care. Help younger kids to plan short-term goals such as planning the activities we can do today vs. long-term goals for older children such as making good grades, joining a team, or mastering a skill. Use

circle time (group time) as well as individual times with children to plan, i.e. “What will you build next?” and “When will you let Jay have a turn?” or “How many days will you take to finish your project?”

#### #5: Accept Children for Who They Are

Acceptance means knowing the disposition and temperament of the children in your care and working to begin where they are in order to move forward in building resilience. For example, some children need lots of practice in social skill building or following the rules, while some need lots of practice in learning cognitive concepts. One is not more important than the other, so we can begin to think of social skill building or



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*Connect children’s “islands of competence” by providing many group activities.*



Photo courtesy of the author

*Empower children to make choices and explore options.*

guided participation as important as learning to read, write, and do arithmetic (Petty, 2009c). As teachers and caregivers, we must know appropriate expectations at different ages and stages of development (Brooks and Goldstein, 2003; Petty, 2009b) to plan resilience-building activities appropriately. Take into account cultural differences in the children in your care and encourage their responses to be germane or connected to their everyday experiences.

**#6: Identify Strengths or “Islands of Competence” (Brooks and Goldstein, 2003)**

Find areas of strength in kids and build upon those by offering activities that provide practice and repetition as opportunities to improve. For example, Sam enjoys being a runner, so be sure to plan activities that al-

low him to run often. Vivian is adept at writing all the letters in the alphabet and wants to write all the names of the children in her class to share with her parents. Provide resources for her and offer intentional, gentle guidance when needed. Once you identify some of the same islands of competence in the young children in your care, be sure to connect their “islands” by providing lots of group or team activities. Resilience building comes more easily when activities are matched with children’s propensities. Once they have enjoyed success on one “island”, the chances of building efficacy or esteem on other areas is greater.

**#7: Do-Overs**

Help children to realize that mistakes are not fatal and can be experiences from which to grow. Give children

the chance to have a “do-over” or the opportunity to redo a “mistaken behavior” (Gartrell, 2003). This not only gives children the chance to practice appropriate behaviors, but also builds trust between you and the child. Also, encourage children to give one another “do-overs” or opportunities to make it better. One teacher made a do-over ball by writing the word “DO-OVER” on an inflated beach ball. When the opportunity arose, she tossed the ball to the child who could practice a more appropriate behavior by having a “re-do” and kept the ball in sight so that children could choose to have a do-over when needed.

**#8: Develop Responsibility**

Provide children opportunities to take care of themselves and others by participating in tasks that make their environments better such as cleaning their spaces, helping one another, caring for pets (with assistance) and being responsible for their belongings. Give them chances to make their communities better also by participating in food and clothing drives, feeding the homeless, and providing services or goods for those in need.

**#9: Offer Meaningful Participation (Benard, 2004)**

Allow children to participate in group care in a meaningful and authentic way. Encourage them to help make class rules along with the daily schedule and a commitment to follow them. Prepare rebus word and picture charts for them to follow or have them make their own. Allow them to assist in menu planning for snacks, meals, special events, etc. as well as planning field trips and other events. Environments in which children feel a part or connected may

foster resilience by reducing stress and anxiety.

## #10: Teach Problem-Solving (Brooks, 2007)

Foster resilience by modeling problem solving. Model these three steps and then have children to act independently from you.

- Identify the problem with all involved.
- Think of two or three ways to solve the problem that all can agree upon.
- Think of a reminder that you can use when needed and share with those involved such as using signs or non-verbal cues.

## Model problem solving.

Children tend to bounce back more if they can solve their own problems rather than having adults constantly directing them. Brooks and Goldstein use the term “resilient mindset” as it empowers children to make choices and explore options that lead to the most positive decisions (2009). For example, when five-year-old Kason uses teasing as a friendly gesture but the recipient of the teasing does not understand, the opportunity for using the three-step plan above is present. Kason may experience teasing as an everyday occurrence from family members and friends and does not see any harm in his actions (Myers et al., 2013). It is with care and consideration that a caregiver may help Kason under-

stand that not everyone has the same perceptions or awareness of teasing.

## Conclusion

The ten ways to foster resilience provided above will be better received by children if we allow them to experience change in small increments as they take baby steps. These small changes can lead to the ability to adjust to larger changes that children routinely face and can create a more resilient or buoyant child who can adapt to life’s challenges. By honoring feelings that children have in dealing with adversity or setbacks, along with identifying their strengths, we can play a part in helping them to “bounce back” or be resilient.

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