

## How Can Parents Nurture Resilience in Their Children?

### SchwabLearning.org asks:

Much of your work in recent years has focused on the themes of hope and resilience. What led to your interest in these concepts? Can you tell us why some children with learning problems are much more successful as adults than others? What contributes to their success?

### Dr. Robert Brooks Answers:

My focus on the themes of hope and resilience arose from my interest in the area of self-esteem in children, as well as from the questions parents asked me. When I began to address the concept of self-esteem, many parents, especially those with children with learning problems, voiced concerns and anxiety about what the future held for their children. Some described portraits of their children that were very disheartening — low self-esteem, poor peer relationships, and failure in school. They posed such questions as, "Is there hope?" "Can my child become more confident and successful?" "Can my child develop more satisfying relationships?"

When I was training as a psychologist, I was taught that our basic personality is formed by the time we are five or six years of age. We now know a great deal of development and change take place after that age. **We also know children who are burdened by learning problems and low self-esteem are not destined to lead a life of unhappiness and lack of success.** In fact, many experience satisfying lives. They are resilient.

Two questions I have often been asked are: "What are the beliefs and skills resilient children possess as compared with those who do not bounce back from adversity?" and "What contributes to some children being more resilient than others?" The answers to both questions hold the key to how we can nurture self-esteem and resilience in children.

### The Mindset of the Resilient Child

As my colleague, Dr. Sam Goldstein, and I describe in our book *Raising Resilient Children*, resilient youngsters possess a set of assumptions about themselves and others that distinguishes them from their peers who are not resilient. We have called this set of assumptions a "mindset." **The mindset of children plays a major role in influencing their behavior, which in turn impacts on their mindset.** Thus, there is an ongoing cycle that may produce a mindset that is more optimistic and hopeful or a mindset that is pessimistic and despairing. When we feel more hopeful, when our self-esteem is higher, we use coping strategies that lead to further growth. However, a feeling of inadequacy and pessimism often triggers coping strategies that are counterproductive or self-defeating (e.g., quitting, clowning, bullying, avoiding).

It is important to understand the mindset resilient youngsters possess so that parents, teachers, and other caregivers can attempt to nurture this mindset during all of their interactions with children with learning problems. The following are several of the key, interrelated components of a resilient mindset:

- **Defining what one has control over and focusing one's time and energy on these areas.** Paul Gerber, who researched adults with learning difficulties who are successful, found that a sense of control was the major factor in their success. He notes, "Control means

- **Believing one can solve problems and make decisions.** This is closely tied to feelings of being in control. It is difficult to imagine children knowing and focusing on what they have control over without possessing solid problem-solving skills.
- **Possessing self-discipline.** Resilient children learn to think before they act. They are guided by a more reflective style instead of being dominated by impulsive behavior.
- **Feeling mistakes and failure are experiences from which to learn.** Resilient individuals believe they can learn from mistakes. Mistakes can serve as the springboard for developing a more realistic picture of oneself and more effective learning strategies. This is also one of the basic features of attribution theory.
- **Believing one can contribute to and make a positive difference in the world.** In my research, I asked adults to look back at their childhood in school and describe one of their most positive moments involving something a teacher said or did to boost their self-esteem. The most frequent response was they were asked to help out or contribute in some manner, such as "I was asked to pass out the milk and straws," "I tutored a younger child," "I helped take care of the plants in the lobby." To be asked to help others communicates the message, "We believe you have something to offer and are a valuable member of the community."
- **Defining one's "islands of competence" but not denying one's areas of weakness.** Every child has islands of competence, or areas of strength. Too often, with children with learning problems, we tend to focus on their deficits and how to "fix" them, rather than on how to build on their strengths. Resilient youngsters are able to articulate and use their strengths. Stated somewhat differently, they do not perceive their entire personality as associated with their learning problems.
- **Feeling comfortable with and believing others can be a source of support and strength.** Resilient youngsters are able to seek out assistance in a comfortable way. This component of a resilient mindset, closely related to all of the other components, captures the significance of positive relationships in the process of fostering resilience.

Researchers have noted three major domains that influence the development of resilience. They are:

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failure situations many children with learning problems experience in school, it is especially important for educators to implement strategies that foster realistic achievement and minimize possible humiliation.

### The Importance of a "Charismatic Adult"

A common theme in these three domains is the presence of a supportive adult. We must never underestimate the influence of one caregiver to help children with learning and attention problems to become increasingly hopeful and successful. Emmy Werner, an eminent researcher in the field of resilience, noted, "Most of all, self-esteem and self-efficacy were promoted through supportive relationships. The resilient youngsters in our study all had at least one person in their lives who accepted them unconditionally."

The late Julius Segal called that one person, a "charismatic adult." In a review of numerous studies, he observed that **one factor helping at-risk children beat the heavy odds against them was "the presence in their lives of a charismatic adult — a person with whom they identify and from whom they gather strength."** Segal went on to say, "And in a surprising number of cases that person turns out to be a teacher."

Supporting Segal's observations was a statement in a Massachusetts Department of Education report that emphasized, "Possibly the most critical element to success within school is a student developing a close and nurturing relationship with at least one caring adult. Students need to feel that there is someone within school whom they know, to whom they can turn, and who will act as an advocate for them."

**I believe parents, teachers, coaches, and other caregivers have the capacity to become the charismatic adult in the lives of youngsters with learning difficulties.** If one is to serve in this role, an important question that emerges is how best to do so and what interventions are most effective. Frameworks for self-esteem, such as attribution theory, as well as an understanding of the components of a resilient mindset can serve as guideposts to answer this question.

Next week, I will address how adults must change their own "negative scripts" and "negative mindsets" if children with learning problems are to change theirs. My final two articles will focus on what parents and teachers can do to foster self-esteem, motivation, hope, and resilience in these youngsters.

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#### About the Contributors

**Robert Brooks, Ph.D.** is on the faculty of Harvard Medical School and has served as Director of the Department of Psychology at McLean Hospital. He has written many articles and book chapters; the book, *The Self-Esteem Teacher*, and co-authored *A Pediatric Approach to Learning Disorders* and *Raising Resilient Children*.

#### Other Resources

## **Books**

Exceeding Expectations: Successful Adults with Learning Disabilities  
[www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0890797056/schwabfoundation/](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0890797056/schwabfoundation/)  
By Henry B. Reiff, Rick Ginsberg, Paul Jay Gerber

Raising Resilient Children  
[www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/0809297655/schwabfoundation](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/0809297655/schwabfoundation)  
By Robert Brooks and Sam Goldstein

Nurturing Resilience in Our Children  
<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0658021109/samgoldphd/104-3026014-819/schwabfoundation/>  
By Robert Brooks, Ph.D. and Sam Goldstein, Ph.D.

On Playing a Poor Hand Well  
<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0393702324/schwabfoundation/>  
By M. Katz, Ph.D.

Overcoming the Odds: High Risk Children from Birth to Adulthood  
<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0801480183/schwabfoundation/>  
By E. Werner & R. Smith

## **Websites**

Dr. Robert Brooks' site  
<http://www.drrobertbrooks.com>