

# childPSYCH News

A newsletter for professionals and parents



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APS Psychologists



Australian Tutoring Association



QUEENSLAND COLLEGE OF TEACHERS

Special points of interest:

- We have a NEW learning centre! Call us now for more information
- At *childpsych* only psychologists who are registered teachers and/or Educational Psychologists will write the report on learning difficulties
- To unsubscribe from this newsletter at any time, either email or call *childpsych*

## Developing resilient children

Resilience is a term used commonly now. It is generally used to describe a person's ability to weather stress and not develop mental health problems. In other words, how well a person copes with stress reflects their resilience.

So is resilience something we are born with or can we learn to be more resilient? Common sense would indicate that some people are "naturally" more resilient but resilience can be learnt. Let's begin then with looking at what the research says. Certainly temperament is a large predictor of resilience. For example, children born with a naturally sociable personality have good self-control over their emotions and are usually positive in their moods, will manage stress far better than other children. Why is this?

Well social scientists think that these children are more likely to receive support from others (because they are well liked) and to be generally optimistic that things will get better (a positive attitude). Cognitive ability is another strong predictor of resilience. For example, children who are good at problem solving are more likely to find solutions to things that are bothering them and overcome their stress. As you can imagine children who have difficulty with problem solving, such as children with AD/HD, tend to



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find it challenging to overcome stress and can be less resilient than non-AD/HD children. While cognitive ability is a strong predictor of resilience, so is a child's view of themselves and the world. Self-esteem is an important predictor of resilience. Children who believe in themselves and their ability to overcome challenges are more likely to be more resilient. By now you may be realising that while we are talking about individual differences, it is impossible to ignore the impact of the environment. This is the nature-nurture debate.

The environment also plays a role in the development of resilience. If we were to look at the link between genes and environment we would find that both work together. For example, temperamentally positive and outgoing children are likely to "self-select" friends who are the same. This in turn reinforces their positive disposition and in turn resilience. Of course a temperamentally positive and outgoing child born into

extreme poverty would cope better in that environment than say a negative and shy child. So the environment then is important in "nurturing" positive temperament traits. But is the environment important in nurturing negative traits? Can we change negative traits? Well while the environment seems able to bring out the best and worst in people, it is far more complicated to "rewire" a negative temperament trait into a positive one. Though research from neuroscience suggests that this may be possible. Regardless, research does suggest that we can certainly teach resilience skills and we can be effective in helping children become more resilient. For example, the Penn State Resiliency Program has shown that by teaching children how to think in a more optimistic way we can reduce their chances of experiencing depression. So if we are to develop resilience in children, what would it look like? Psychologists typically concentrate on developing a range of factors. Two of these, parenting style and effective thinking are discussed here.

The Power of Parenting Effective parenting, in order to promote resilience involves such things as teaching our children to solve their own problems. For example, the child who rushes home crying asking her mother for help with girls who are teasing her will not develop much resilience if the mother "tells" her what to do. Instead, a parent who

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## Learning Problems?

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sits with the child and **helps her to think of possible solutions** and then helps the child to pick the best one and implement it will do a better job of developing a resilient attitude. This parent is teaching their child to problem solve. Other parenting practices such as being consistent and fair when disciplining (e.g. avoid yelling and harsh punishments) are also important.

### Effective thinking

One of the best skills and attitudes we can develop in our children is that of being an effective thinker. Resilient children are effective thinkers who tend to take a "problem solving" approach to coping with their stress. These children think about what alternatives there are, who they can get help from and so on. Certainly, children who are born "temperamentally easy" tend to be more effective thinkers. But research has suggested we can teach children to be problem solvers and effective thinkers. And more importantly, learning how to be an effective prob-

lem solver meant that even if the child was temperamentally destined to be less resilient, they could become more resilient! So when a child is confronted with a problem or source of stress, resist the urge to give them solutions. Instead, encourage them to think about what they could do about it – brainstorm or list all the possible solutions. Then have them think about what would happen if they put into action each idea (think about the consequences). Then select the best idea based on the best consequence. *Consequential thinking* is an important cognitive skill to have as it teaches the child to think ahead and imagine what would happen. Thinking ahead and reflecting on the implications of our decisions is important in maintaining friendships. And we know that maintaining friendships is important in ensuring we have social support when we need it.

In summary, resilience seems to be something we can develop in children who do not seem to be predisposed to being naturally resilient.

## Social Kids™ Research Update

We recently completed some statistical analyses of our Social Kids program examining pre and post treatment scores on the Social Skills Intervention System rating scales (SSIS).

The results revealed statistically significant improvement in the children's ability to communicate as well as a decrease in bullying behaviours and an improvement in self control. Given this was a clinical sample, meaning that children had a range of diagnoses such as autism and AD/HD, the results are promising.

We will be conducting larger field trials in 2012 and looking at expanding the 8 session program to incorporate new findings in the research literature.

*If your school is interested in being part of our field trials in 2012 please contact us. There is no charge for field trial programs.*

## Creating resilience promoting schools

Schools have an important role in developing social and emotional resilience. Many researchers in this area argue that schools are more than just institutions that impart knowledge, they are social environments where children and adolescents learn about themselves, their abilities, qualities and relationships with others. This is achieved by ensuring good student-teacher interactions, high academic expectations and a good link between the community and the student.

Good student-teacher interactions requires not only meeting the students needs but the teachers. Resilient teachers are themselves good problem solvers and cope with stress well. Research has suggested that teachers who have organised classrooms, clear rules and consequences **and are in contact with student's families** and hold class meetings are more effective. This in turn creates an environment that encourages students to begin to develop skills needed to be resilient.



Interestingly, teachers who had low academic expectations tended to have students who performed poorly. A lot of this is driven by the **teacher's own beliefs about who is likely to be academically successful and who isn't.** Programs that have encouraged teachers to look for an individual area of strength for each student, for example, have been show to increase student academic performance.

Certainly, while schools are social institutions, they also need to be relevant to the wider community. Over the last decade schools in Australia have taken large strides to offer various pathways out of school. Many young people are at risk of abusing alcohol and other sub-

stances. Research has shown that those schools that develop students self awareness, awareness of other peoples emotions, how to manage their own emotions and manage their relationships, had schools where students got along better.

As can be seen, a focus on developing social and emotional skills in students has many benefits. These benefits lead to an environment where resilience can be developed in students.

### Helping Children with Autism Package

childpsych is a recognised provider of early intervention services for children with autism.

All our psychologists meet the Australian Psychological Society accreditation requirements for working with children with autism.

