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JULY 2026

SUMMER GROWTH, RESILIENCE, AND BUILDING STRONG FOUNDATIONS

WHAT ARE PROTECTIVE FACTORS?

Protective factors are the positive conditions, relationships, and supports that help children and families cope with adversity and thrive despite challenges. While risk factors increase the likelihood of negative outcomes, protective factors help buffer stress and promote healthy development.

Research from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has identified several protective factors that contribute to positive mental health outcomes, including supportive relationships, emotional competence, school connectedness, and family engagement. Children who have access to these supports are more likely to demonstrate resilience, perform better academically, and experience fewer behavioral and mental health concerns.

Protective factors can be developed and strengthened over time. Schools, families, and communities all play a role in creating environments where children feel safe, supported, valued, and capable of overcoming obstacles.

When communities focus on building protective factors, they are investing not only in individual wellbeing but also in stronger schools, healthier families, and more resilient communities.



As summer continues, many families are enjoying a change of pace and opportunities to spend time together. It is also a valuable time to focus on the protective factors that help children and families thrive.

Protective factors—such as supportive relationships, healthy routines, emotional skills, and positive community connections—play an important role in building resilience and supporting mental wellbeing.

As we begin looking ahead to a new school year, July is a great opportunity to strengthen these foundations and help young people develop the confidence and skills needed to navigate challenges and succeed.



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RESILIENCE: MORE THAN "BOUNCING BACK"

Resilience is often described as the ability to recover after adversity, but experts now recognize it as a dynamic process rather than a fixed personality trait. Resilience develops when individuals have opportunities to face challenges while receiving appropriate support and encouragement.

According to the American Psychological Association, resilience involves behaviors, thoughts, and actions that can be learned and strengthened over time. Children are not born resilient; they build resilience through experiences that help them develop confidence, problem-solving skills, emotional regulation, and healthy relationships.

Research also shows that resilience does not require the absence of hardship. In fact, resilience often develops through successfully navigating manageable challenges. Supportive adults play a critical role by helping children process emotions, model healthy coping strategies, and encourage perseverance during difficult situations.

Some ways adults can help build resilience include:

- Encouraging a growth mindset by focusing on effort rather than perfection
- Helping children identify solutions to problems rather than immediately solving problems for them
- Teaching emotional vocabulary and healthy coping strategies
- Modeling self-care and stress management
- Providing opportunities for responsibility and independence

Resilience is strengthened every time a child learns, adapts, and moves forward from a challenge.



The transition back to school can bring excitement for some students and anxiety for others. New teachers, changing routines, academic expectations, and social pressures can create uncertainty, particularly for children who struggle with anxiety or have experienced stress or trauma.

Preparing gradually can help reduce stress and increase confidence. Research suggests that predictable routines and positive expectations support smoother transitions and improved emotional wellbeing.

Families can help by:

- Gradually adjusting bedtime and wake-up schedules
- Reintroducing school-year routines
- Talking openly about hopes and concerns for the upcoming year
- Visiting school buildings or attending orientation events when possible
- Encouraging children to identify trusted adults they can turn to for support

Students who begin the year feeling connected, prepared, and supported are more likely to experience academic success, positive relationships, and improved mental health outcomes throughout the year.



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FOUR PROTECTIVE FACTORS FAMILIES CAN STRENGTHEN THIS SUMMER



HEALTHY SLEEP HABITS

Sleep is one of the most overlooked factors affecting mental health and learning. Adequate sleep supports emotional regulation, memory, concentration, and physical health. Studies consistently show that children and adolescents who get sufficient sleep are better equipped to manage stress and maintain positive mental health. Summer often brings later bedtimes and less structure. While flexibility is important, maintaining consistent sleep routines can help children transition more easily into the school year and support overall wellbeing.

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY



Physical activity benefits far more than physical health. Exercise has been shown to reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression, improve mood, and support cognitive functioning. Regular movement also helps children manage stress and develop confidence.

Families do not need expensive equipment or organized sports to stay active. Walking, biking, swimming, playing at the park, gardening, and outdoor games all provide meaningful opportunities for movement and connection.



EMOTIONAL CHECK-INS

Children experience stress and strong emotions like adults, but they may need support identifying and expressing their feelings. Regular emotional check-ins create opportunities for communication and can strengthen relationships. Rather than asking only, "How was your day?" consider questions such as:

- What was something that made you feel proud today?
- What challenged you today?
- What is something you're looking forward to?
- Is there anything you're worried about?

Consistent conversations help children feel heard, supported, and understood.

POSITIVE ADULT RELATIONSHIPS



Research consistently identifies supportive relationships with caring adults as one of the strongest protective factors for youth. A trusted adult can provide guidance, encouragement, stability, and emotional support during challenging times. These relationships may include parents, grandparents, teachers, coaches, mentors, faith leaders, neighbors, or other caring adults. Even brief positive interactions can contribute to a child's sense of belonging and self-worth. Children who feel connected to supportive adults are more likely to develop resilience, engage positively in school, and seek help when they need it.



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FINAL THOUGHT

Resilience is built through everyday experiences, supportive relationships, and environments where children feel safe, valued, and connected. While challenges are a natural part of life, strong protective factors help young people develop the skills and confidence needed to overcome obstacles and continue growing. As summer continues and the school year approaches, small actions—whether creating routines, encouraging healthy habits, or simply being a trusted source of support—can make a lasting impact. Together, families, schools, and communities can help create the foundation every child needs to thrive.

