

The Science of Resilience



Resilience: is it just making lemonade out of lemons? Is it fair or even effective to encourage children to call on rugged individualism to *decide* to be resilient? Growing in resilience is much more complex, and mentors have an important role to play.

Resilience can be likened to a seesaw where positive experiences are on one end and negative experiences can stack up on the other. We know that more weight on one end can tip the scale. We also know that, on the playground, the seesaw is mounted on a base that is halfway between the two ends, and that helps the rider maintain balance even when the weights are uneven.

Children are biologically predisposed to having that base, or fulcrum, more toward one end than the other, making them more susceptible to the positive or to the negative. After birth, experiences in infancy and early childhood determine its location, too. But the placement of the fulcrum can be influenced beyond those very early years by what happens next. Even as adults, we can continue to improve our resilience. Watch this 2 ½ minute video for an excellent representation.

<https://youtu.be/1r8hj72bfGo>

The Harvard University Center on the Developing Child makes no bones about it:

“The single most common factor for children who develop resilience is at least one stable and committed relationship with a supportive parent, caregiver, or other adult. These relationships provide the personalized responsiveness, scaffolding, and protection that buffer children from developmental disruption. They also build key capacities—such as the ability to plan, monitor, and regulate behavior—that enable children to respond adaptively to adversity and thrive. This combination of supportive relationships, adaptive skill-building, and positive experiences is the foundation of resilience.” <http://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/resilience/>

How do these relationships work? In infancy, the interaction between a child and the caregiver can be described as serve-and-return. The child cries or babbles or reaches out; the parent smiles, speaks, coos, and touches. These interactions actually shape brain architecture and help determine the early placement of that fulcrum. When we speak of parental incarceration as an adverse childhood experience, it is not only the trauma of witnessing arrest or encountering the difficulties that follow for the family. Even more, it is the abrupt removal of an important source of strength-building serve-and-return.

It’s easy to draw the analogy. When mentors communicate in an accessible, nonjudgmental way, responding to wherever the mentee wants to take the conversation or the visit, that is a form of serve-and-return. Another key contributor to developing resilience is a sense of self-esteem and self-efficacy. Mentors can help mentees find their strengths, especially their “islands of competence”. Mentors also model self-regulation for the mentee, and notice and praise mentees when they demonstrate managing their own behavior and emotions. And, mentors provide the all-important sounding board for mentees to try out and strengthen their problem-solving capabilities.

You can read more about resilience and view more brief videos at <http://developingchild.harvard.edu/>