

Our Biggest Resilience Mistake

By Dr Justin Coulson

We are accidentally raising fragile children.

It's not because we're bad parents. It might be the opposite. It's because we're "good ones". We love our kids so much that we smooth the path ahead of them, intervene when things get hard, and rescue them from discomfort before it has a chance to teach them anything.

It feels like protection. It might be the opposite. But it takes wisdom to know the difference. And it's hard because it seems that the stakes are high.

About ten years ago, my daughter (Abbie), came home from school in tears. Her best friend, Abby, had discovered that her mum's cancer had returned after years of remission. The doctors had caught it too late. Her body was riddled with it, and the prognosis was terminal. Four weeks. Christmas.

Abbie announced that, to support her friend, she would sign up for the Leukemia Foundation's "World's Greatest Shave". We asked what colour she would dye her hair. Her response: "I'm not dying it. I'm shaving it." We tried to convince her it was a bad idea. The possibility she would be teased or worse worried us. Grade 8, we suggested, can be tough on kids who look different. Abbie dismissed our concerns. She was all in.

Sadly the doctors' forecast was accurate. Mrs Johnson passed away at Christmas time. We hoped Abbie would change her mind about the shave but she grew more determined.

The day arrived. Abbie's head was shaved with Abby, Mr Johnson, and our entire family bearing witness. Thousands of dollars were raised in honour of Abby's mum, Mrs Johnson. And many tears were shed as our brave daughter said goodbye to her hair.

Now for the sad part. Despite her bravery, despite the school principal inviting Abbie onto the stage at assembly to describe what she'd done and how much she'd raised, despite the Johnson's being well known in our school community, and despite the applause for her efforts, Abbie came home in tears on many afternoons. She was called names. She was pushed and shoved. Her lunch was stolen. Abbie was "different", and the kids let her know it.

"Do you regret it?" I asked one afternoon as I comforted her.

"Dad, my hair will grow back", she responded. "But the Johnson's don't get their mum back. It's a small price to pay."

Anti-Fragile

Nassim Taleb is a statistician and philosopher who thinks about risk and uncertainty. He claims there are three kinds of systems:

1. Fragile ones - the type that break under pressure.
2. Resilient ones - the kind that absorb a shock and return to where they were.
3. Antifragile ones - which use stress as fuel. They don't just survive difficulty. They grow *because* of it.

Most of us are trying to raise resilient kids. Taleb invites a more interesting question: what if we aimed higher?

The trap we don't see coming

Fragility rarely announces itself. A child whose parents have smoothed every conflict, intervened in every struggle, and removed every meaningful obstacle can look perfectly capable - right up until the moment they aren't. The problem isn't that these kids lack love or support. It's that they've never had the chance to build internal architecture for stress.

When difficulty finally arrives - and it always does - they have no practiced response. Weakness was never allowed to become strength.

Resilience versus antifragility

Resilience means returning to baseline. It's recovery. It's important, and we should cultivate it. But antifragility is *the capacity to be changed by hard experiences in ways that leave you better equipped*, not merely restored.

A child who navigates a painful friendship fallout without a parent stepping in to fix it doesn't just get through it. They learn about conflict, about emotion, about repair, in ways no amount of coaching from the sideline could teach. The difficulty was the lesson.

Presence without rescue

This doesn't mean leaving kids to struggle alone, or treating hardship as automatically character-building. This is not a "toughen up princess" message. Chronic stress without support is damaging, not developmental.

The antifragile environment is one where a child encounters age-appropriate difficulty and knows they're not alone in it.

The parent's role shifts from problem-solver to context-setter. You're not fixing the situation. You're providing the secure base from which they can engage with it themselves.

For a primary school child, that might mean resisting the urge to call another parent when friendship gets complicated, and instead sitting with your child while they figure out what they want to do. For a teenager, it might mean allowing a poor decision to carry its natural consequences, and being present for the debrief rather than the prevention. You're nearby, not in between.

The children who adapt when plans fall apart, who recover from failure without collapse, who find their footing in genuinely hard circumstances - they're rarely the ones who had the smoothest ride. They're the ones whose difficult experiences counted for something. Who felt the weight of things, and discovered they could carry it.

I almost prevented my daughter from having one of the most powerful experiences of her life. By getting out of the way but staying nearby, she showed me she was stronger than I could ever have known.



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