5 Secrets to Resilient Kids

In 2014 Andrew Fuller surveyed around 16,000 Australian young people about resilience. The most resilient kids agreed - almost universally - with two statements. The least resilient disagreed with both:

I have a parent who cares about me.
I have a parent who listens to me.

The most common definition of resilience I hear is that it is the capacity to “bounce back” from adversity and challenge. In other words, it’s getting back up and doing the hard thing that just did you. A parent once suggested to me that resilience is “grace through adversity”.

The thing about resilience is that it usually doesn’t feel very resilient when you’re in it. It’s only after the trial that you experience the triumph.

Yet many parents misunderstand resilience. They think it means adopting a “toughen up princess” approach to life; that when hard things happen, children should be left alone to figure it out. That they should “drink some concrete and harden up”.

The scientific resilience research points *away* from this mindset. Resilience is built as much *inside* a child as it is built *around* a child - in healthy, supportive environments - and usually in interactions that seem too small to matter. Except they do.

Here are five secrets to the most resilient kids:

They know you care - and they know you listen

Based on Andrew Fuller’s questionnaire, this has to be the first one. This means resilience is built by knowing you *matter* and have someone’s support. Your child will be more likely to be resilient if you can stop what you’re doing, look at them, and listen when they speak to you. Turn your body towards them. Put the phone down. When they bring you a problem, hear all of it, then ask "What do you reckon you should do?" and listen again. You don't have to solve it. It’s not your job to carry it. It’s your job to care about it - and show it.

Stay calmer than your child

Steve Biddulph suggests a parent's main job is to always remain calmer than their child in those big moments - and often in the little ones too. A child's nervous system learns to settle by *borrowing* a settled one. If you meet a meltdown with your own meltdown, you've taught escalation and probably created fear and anxiety. This asks a lot of you, but it builds the support needed for resilience and regulation. Before you respond, *take one breath you can hear*. Deal with the behaviour once the storm has passed, not during it.

Let them do hard things

You don't know you're resilient until you've done something hard. But we seem intent on rescuing our kids from anything that they feel challenged by. There *is* a time and a place. Sometimes it makes sense to give them a push or a leg-up. Be discerning. But the default should be towards reducing the rush to rescue and reassure. Stop letting them skip it. Research shows doing hard things makes kids feel *less* anxious. A Yale University team found that reducing those parental accommodations was as effective at reducing anxiety as therapy - but waaaay cheaper! Remember, every time you rescue, you tell them they couldn't have coped without you. Let them approach the new friend. Let them try out for the team. Let them stumble a little. Let them stay in the hard class. Just stay close while they do it. (Secrets 1 and 2 above matter here.)

Give them a story bigger than themselves

Our kids rely on roots for their foundations. This is our family culture. Or our faith, traditions, a cause, a family identity, or some other purpose. It could simply be that someone depends on them - so they know they're contributing to something bigger than themselves. Resilience researcher, Ann Masten, found meaning-making is as important as robust relationships and self-regulation when it comes to core protective factors. Children who can locate their suffering inside something larger - who see hardship as something valuable because it's aligned with a life purpose - get through it faster. Tell them the family stories. Give them something to serve. A child who is genuinely needed or who sees a bigger picture in their trials is very hard to sink.

Let them out of your sight

In 2023, Peter Gray, a world-leading "play" expert wrote that the collapse in children's independent activity is a central driver of rising anxiety and depression. Other researchers have found children with more risky outdoor play have better physical and social outcomes. And there's also suggestions that climbing high, moving fast and roaming out of range actually recalibrates the fear system. In short, risky play and other activities are good for your kids. (Note - danger means no idea about risk, like a toddler playing near a pool, whereas risky play means you can see the dangers and make decisions accordingly.) My recommendation: for resilient kids, send them to the shop (or, if they're little, let them go into the next aisle and get the milk and bring it back to you). Let them ride to a mate's place (or, for little ones, ride ahead to the corner and wait for you). Let them climb higher than you'd like. And watch how big and capable it lets them feel.

We don't need to be left alone to be resilient. In fact, the more support we have around us, the stronger we are. Remember, your job is to care, not carry. To support, not save.

Our kids face challenges. They're up to the task if they've got you behind them.



Dr Justin Coulson is a dad to 6 daughters and grandfather to 1 granddaughter. He is the parenting expert and co-host of Channel Nine's Parental Guidance, and he and his wife host Australia's #1 podcast for parents and family: The Happy Families Podcast. He has written 9 books about families and parenting. For further details visit happyfamilies.com.au.