

Parents = the Difference

a monthly parenting newsletter

As I write this, I realize each one of your school experiences is different. Some of your children are on A/B schedules, others are 100% remote, and a few are in the physical classroom five days a week. A handful of schools are only offering remote at the moment due to COVID-related shutdowns. Now that vaccine distribution has begun, do we dare expect a return to universal in-person schooling? Teacher after teacher has expressed amazement at the children's resilience and ability to learn despite the inconsistent patchwork of instructions thrust upon them. Much of that is because of you and your commitment to your child's learning and growth. Keep it up! For the first time in many months, we can see there is a light at the end of the tunnel.

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Explaining the Unexplainable

These are difficult times to be a parent. You are expected to understand and then explain events not faced in generations to your children. First the pandemic changed every aspect of our lives and robbed our children of their daily routines. That was followed by the murders of unarmed Black men and the consequent Black Lives Matter uprising which brought both peaceful protests and turmoil to the streets of New York. You found yourself explaining both the shutdown of the city and the voices of protest that could be heard in your living rooms. Now you find yourself in a position to try and explain a third unexplainable event, the violent siege of our Capitol.

Children understand the world with the help of trusted adults. How do you explain violence to children when we teach them to "use their words" rather than their hands to express big feelings? They don't have the capacity to understand what they see on TV. You may feel you've shielded your children, but know they are listening. They may have overheard the tone of news commentators and are vigilantly watching you for clues regarding their safety.

To help young children it is important to find out what they know and how they understand it. Start by asking them. Children take in snippets of information they've heard, add their own beliefs or anxieties, and weave them together to create a story. Since young children believe the world revolves around them; believe only what they see and hear; and engage

in distortion-prone magical thinking, they may concoct a scary story that does not match reality. If you find this to be the case, assure them they are safe and you would never, ever let anything happen to them.

When you talk with your child use language you think they'll understand. May I offer—"Even grownups have big feelings. The people on TV were really mad and did things they shouldn't have done. It's okay to be mad, but it's not okay to do mean things." This is an ideal opportunity to ask them what makes them mad and what they do when they feel that way. Take it a step further and talk about ways to handle big mad feelings. Ask what helps calm them down and feel better. Tell them what works for you.

You probably don't need to engage in a civics lesson with your 4-year-old. The concept of what happened are likely beyond their ability to understand. Young children want to know how what they hear and see affects them. They want to know why grownups sometimes act badly. They want to know if they are safe.

These will not be the last conversations you have with your children about the unfolding events of 2020/2021. As they grow and mature their questions will become more complicated and require deeper answers. No matter your child's age, it is helpful to find out what they know, how they conceptualize it, and how they feel it impacts them. Use what they tell you to guide your responses.



Calvin problem solving outside the box!

Resilience

Resilience is the ability to face and deal with disappointment, mistakes, stress, adversity, and trauma. Years ago it was believed resilience was something you were born with—either you had it or you didn't. We have come to understand that isn't the case. There are many factors to developing a resilient mindset. We now know resilience is based on both experience and relationship.

Nurturing resilience is an important part of parenting. It is built by facing one problem at a time. The outcome of a problem is important, but even more important is how your child feels about themselves as a result. When your child successfully faces a problem, big or small, they walk away with a feeling of self-worth that is deeper than being told 'great job.' Resilience is based on internal self-esteem. It is your child's job to face and resolve the ordinary problems of their day. It is your job to give them the space to struggle and sometimes fail. Resilience is built, not given.

Temperament is also a factor. Some children readily embrace challenges while others are more hesitant to try and worry about failing. You cannot change your child's temperament, but you can help them develop a more resilient mindset. You can help your child develop the skills needed for resilience by:

- Helping them set realistic goals and expectations
- Instilling in them a belief that they have the ability to face and solve their problems
- Assisting them in developing coping strategies when things don't go as planned
- Suggesting to them how to use their strengths when facing problems
- Providing opportunities for them to build positive, trusting social skills so they feel confident asking for help
- Focusing on what they have control over rather than what they don't
- Filling their life with the love that helps them feel special and appreciated

The single most important factor in building resilience in children is a supportive, loving relationship with a consistent caring adult—a trusted person who is supportive when they don't feel very good about themselves. A person who is able to watch them struggle without jumping to the rescue. You can be that trusted adult your child's life by providing continual opportunities to grow, struggle, sometimes fail, and ultimately succeed.

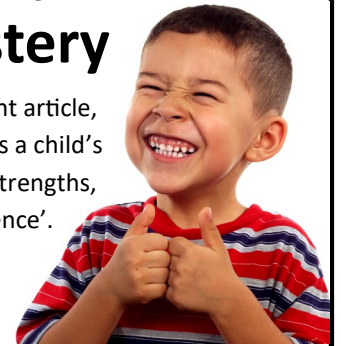


Islands of Competence and Mastery

As mentioned in the adjacent article, a factor contributing to resiliency is a child's ability to know and tap into their strengths, also known as 'islands of competence'.

Every child has qualities that make them special. As your child grows, their strengths become evident.

Confident children who can lean into their strengths are self-assured and experience hopefulness.



Ask your child what they think they do well. They may not know immediately, but tell them you can help them figure it out. Being able to articulate what you are good at is powerful. Nurturing their strengths is a key to raising a confident child. Being able to demonstrate strengths and knowing they are valued by others are the building blocks of self-esteem. Ideally, children should feel skilled in at least one or two areas.

Self-esteem is built through mastery. Mastery means working at something until it is completed. Challenges happen everyday: buttoning a coat, putting together a puzzle, using words to communicate big angry feelings, paying attention during a remote class. Hard earned success is more valued than praise. Yes, of course you should praise your child, but if you want to bolster self-esteem praise their efforts.

Children who feel poorly about themselves sometimes have difficulty hearing words of praise. Because self-worth is low, it's hard to believe the positive things people say about them. This can be frustrating for parents who believe that if they just praise their child it will somehow change how they feel about themselves and make them feel better.

You can help your child build self-esteem by giving them space to try and fail. When they get stuck, help them problem solve rather than jumping in and telling them how to do it. Ask what they've tried and wonder if there's anything else they might try. Children who can articulate their problems are often able to come up with their own solutions. When you solve your own problem, you feel competent and begin to believe you can solve other problems too.

You can help your child tap into their islands of competence by providing opportunities to use them. If your child is a master Lego builder, make sure they have a space to build and display their work. Rather than praising what they made, ask how they made it. If your child is social, provide chances to interact with others and let them know people enjoy talking with them. If your child is nurturing, bring a pet into your lives and allow them to care for it.