



## Resilience and coping with problems

*“Resilience is the ability to manage and learn from difficulties and to bounce back after diversity.”*

(Department of Education and Children’s Services, 2007 p1)

There is some debate over just what makes one person more resilient than another. However, personality, life experiences and emotional intelligence all influence how well we bounce back.

**Emotional intelligence** is defined by the *Encarta World English Dictionary* as the “understanding of feelings: personal attributes that enable people to succeed in life, including self-awareness, empathy, self-confidence, and self-control.”

[http://uk.encyarta.msn.com/dictionary\\_1481581159/emotional\\_intelligence.html](http://uk.encyarta.msn.com/dictionary_1481581159/emotional_intelligence.html)

### How resilient is your child?

How we deal with every-day problems tells us a lot about resilience. What do our children or students do when they are faced with problems?

- Are they curious or do they show signs of anxiety or fear?
- Are they confident enough to make mistakes – and learn from them?
- Can they change their minds or actions when things don’t go as planned?
- Can they honestly express their feelings, or do they withdraw or hide behind humour or acting out?
- Can they defend themselves?
- Can they see the positives that come out of any situation?

### Children with disabilities

For children with disabilities there are a number of factors that can influence their resilience.

For example, children with **developmental delays** or **literacy difficulties** might have frequently experienced failure. Or they may be conscious of not being able to do everything their peers can do. This is likely to influence their sense of self-efficacy. And this, in turn, can lead to refusal to attempt work they perceive as too difficult.

Children with **developmental delays** will have difficulty with higher order thinking skills such as reasoning, problem-solving and analysing. It may be difficult for them to work out solutions or adjust to unexpected changes or challenges.

For these children you may see frequent and sometimes violent outbursts or seemingly “stubborn” behaviour. This could be due to anger, frustration, fear and other strong emotions they are not able to manage.

Children with **language delays** will find it difficult to use language-related problem-solving methods such as verbal expression of emotions or negotiation.

Children with **sensory sensitivities** may be so overwhelmed by sights, sounds and/or movement that they are not able to control their response to new or unfamiliar situations.

### What can we do?

To build resilience, we need to help our children develop emotional intelligence.

It is important to note that facing difficulties, problems or risks is an important part of life. We want to, and should, protect our children from harm. But it is important, as with everything, to do this in moderation.

**Always solving our children’s problems, or taking them away from challenging situations could cause them to be less resilient.** That is, when faced with a problem later in life, they are not able to cope or effectively solve the problem.

Having said that, it is important that we equip them to deal with difficult situations, and provide emotional support through talking, supervision and encouragement as they deal with life’s challenges.

### Problem-solving skills

Successful problem-solving usually involves self-talk and a specific sequence of steps. It may go something like this:

1. Whoa! I’m feeling really angry/upset/frustrated/...
2. I better take a deep breath and relax!
3. I am angry/upset/frustrated/etc because....
4. Because I am good at... or not so good at...

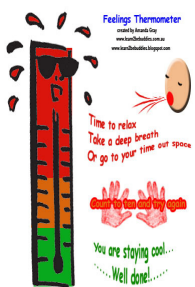
5. What I could do is..., but if I do that ... will happen. Can I live with that?
6. Yep, I can live with that. Here goes...
7. Well, that didn't work.... but that worked well... I might do .... next time
8. But I did a good job just having a go!

### Step One: Identifying emotions

Faced with a difficult situation, the first thing we need to do is get control of our emotions. The first step in this process is the ability to identify what we are feeling.

In the grip of intense emotion it is quite difficult to express it in words. One strategy that is used to help children identify their emotions is a feeling's thermometer.

Feelings thermometers help children express and rate their emotions even if they are unable to use words to do this. There are many versions out there, but the following link has a great version: <http://www.cognitivetherapyforkids.com/Resources/thermometer.pdf>



Paul Stallard's book, *Think Good Feel Good*, also has a great example in Chapter 10. I have also put one on the *Learn to be Buddies* blog.

### Step two: Controlling emotions

Lindy Petersen has written a great program called *Stop, Think, Do*. It is about using the symbol of traffic lights to help children become calm and consider consequences before they act.

This program can be a very effective tool in helping children who act impulsively or struggle with management of emotions like anger and anxiety.

### Step 3: Identifying the problem

Some ways to help children identify the problem after they calm down include:

- **Talking it through:**

**For young children**, make sure you get down to their level and use reassuring physical contact (such as holding their hand or rubbing their back – each child will have a different preference).

**For older children**, make sure you give them eye-contact and your full, calm attention. Avoid finishing their sentences, and wait patiently with minimal prompting for them to explain what happened. And, most importantly, avoid making statements like “Why are you making a fuss about that?” Lead them into making their own judgements about the problem by asking questions like, “Do you think we can do something about it?” or getting them to rate the problem on a scale of 1-10, 10 being “the end of the world”.

- **Pictures, gestures and role play.**

One of the difficulties very young children with high learning abilities (what has been called “gifted”) face is that their language lets them down. That is, their childish language does not give them the vocabulary they need to communicate the complexity of their thoughts. This can also be the case for children with **expressive language disorders**. This is a very frustrating experience, and can lead to “melt-downs” or “tantrums”.

The best way to deal with this is to get the child to point, role play, demonstrate or even draw a picture of their problem. The process may take a little longer, but it will be worth it.

- **Write it down.**

For children or teens who may be reluctant to talk about their problems, they may find it easier to write it down. For example, a

youth who is living with depression may find it much easier to express themselves in song, poetry or journaling than in speech. However, you need to be careful about this. There needs to be some structure and supervision to the journaling process to protect the child or youth from increasing their bleak outlook on life and experiences. I have put some suggestions about this on the *Learn to be Buddies* blog.

### Steps 4-8: Self-belief

Our beliefs about what we are capable of have a big impact on how we go about dealing with challenging situations.

We can help our children build confidence in their abilities by:

- Giving praise, rewards and encouragement.

- Getting our children to identify and record their own successes. Sometimes it is not enough if it just comes from you.

- Give children responsibilities, big or small ... making sure they are able to fulfil them. Helping others and taking responsibility builds confidence and self-respect.

- Let children work through their own problems. Coach them, cheer them on from the sidelines, but don't play the game for them.

### Some references and links you might want to follow up:

Department of Education and Children's Services (2007). *Resilience. Issues in Society*, 260, p 1-3.

Gill, T. (2007). *No Fear: Growing up in a risk averse society*. London: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation.

Stallard, P. (2002). *Think Good- Feel Good*. John Wiley & Sons: Australia

<http://www.youthbeyondblue.com/factsheets-and-info>

<http://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/factsheets/index.cfm>