

# The comeback kid

Does your child take the rough with the smooth? With a little help, the resilient child is up for any challenge

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**O**NE LOVELY, SUNNY summer's day Daniel, who is four years old, was at a local park with his parents for a picnic. Upon their arrival, Daniel and his mother and father observed a scene replete with the recreational delights of lush grass, shady trees, warm open spaces and, best of all, an adventure playground. What happened next provides an insight into how Daniel is likely to cope with adversity, and recover from it, throughout his life. In short, what happened next provides an insight into this little boy's resilience.

Not surprisingly, Daniel had the most wonderful time. He confidently swung on the swings, slid down the slides, toured the tunnels, and flew on the zip wire. Under the watchful gaze of his parents, he tried everything and excitedly reported his feats of bravery and accomplishment. His mother and father accompanied him to each piece of equipment and warmly acknowledged his efforts. They even tried some of the more difficult ones to show what is possible and remained close by to catch their child if he should fall. Leaving the playground, Daniel sought acknowledgement from his parents that he would be able to come again another day.

Yes, Daniel's day sounds fairly unremarkable doesn't it? But looked at closely, the amazing interaction that's occurring between parent and child is a perfect example of promoting resilience.

But before looking at resilience, let's first tackle its close sibling, adversity, which is an aspect of every child's life. It is present when your child is learning a new skill, on his first day of school, when he is negotiating conflicts and when his ambition exceeds his ability. Some children demonstrate persistence in the face of adverse conditions, whereas others shy away from it. Those who persist in their endeavours learn that adversity can be tolerated. Those who tolerate adversity and succeed in their endeavours under adverse conditions experience mastery. Mastery is critical in the development



of a perception of personal competence and capacity to influence personal outcomes. In the famous words of the 19th-century philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, “that which does not kill me makes me stronger”.

The promotion of resilience is a universal concern for parents. However, just as universal is the concern for shielding your child from the physical and emotional distress that can arise in conditions of adversity. These seemingly competing concerns can be a source of confusion for parents and have the potential to cloud their vision of what is in their child’s best interests. Yet, as in the case of Daniel, simple love, nurture and protection is at the very heart of building resilience.

There are three key variables that impact directly on a child’s resilience – arousal, attachment and needs provision. Taking arousal first, in simple terms, it refers to the level of activity of the body’s nervous system. Arousal goes up and down during the day, depending on a person’s mood, what they are doing and what is

happening, and is generally at its lowest when we are asleep and highest when we are in a state of high emotion.

Arousal is directly implicated in a child’s capacity to learn and in his performance of daily tasks. When arousal is too low or too high, your child is physiologically incapable of performing at his best. Mastery is therefore less likely and your child is vulnerable to repeated failure in his efforts to complete daily tasks. The result is that your child’s self-confidence will be undermined and his ability to cope with adversity will be reduced. In contrast, if you can maintain your child’s arousal within an optimal range he will be more likely to perform at his best, achieve mastery and feel capable and competent when faced with adversity.

Parents who support optimal levels of arousal strike a balance between encouraging acceptance of risks and protection from potential harm, such as when Daniel’s mother and father stood at the foot of the ladder while their son carefully negotiated the slippery slide. Parents who both support

## FIVE WAYS TO RESILIENCE

- Take a balanced approach to exposing your child to challenging situations – encourage acceptance of risks while protecting him from any potential harm.
- Be a proactive parent! Try to anticipate your child’s needs and reasonable wishes, and respond to them as often as you can before your child actively seeks to have their needs or wishes met.
- Ensure that your child experiences his inner world as being both understood by you and important to you. Observe your child’s non-verbal cues and the situation that you are in and then say out loud what you believe he might be thinking and feeling.
- Show delight in your child’s achievements and concern at his distress. In doing so, you will maintain a supportive emotional connection with your child that guards against him feeling overwhelmed in times of adversity.
- Believe in your child’s competency so that he will, too.

**“To accept challenges,  
your child must trust  
the world is a safe place”**

and encourage their child to accept risks and challenges, while, at the same time, protecting him from the debilitating and disempowering effects of prolonged emotional distress and repeated or overwhelming failure, ensure experiences of mastery that are essential to the development of his resilience.

Yet in order to feel empowered to accept challenges, your child needs to be able to trust that the world is generally a safe place and that others, but especially you, can be trusted and depended upon to assist him when he needs help. This expectation springs from the attachment that your child feels towards you and is something that was established in very early childhood.

The quality of attachment is influenced by accessibility, sensitive responsiveness and affective attunement. Accessibility concerns the extent to which you provide a caring response. Sensitive responsiveness is about how accurately you read your child’s signals. Affective attunement refers to times when you express similar emotions to that of your child, building

an emotional union. Again, Daniel’s parents demonstrated these attributes, ensuring that attachment was profound and their son felt secure enough to venture boldly forth and explore.

If, however, unlike Daniel, a child’s emotional and physical needs are not met, the impact on that child’s resilience level can be catastrophic. In the absence of reliable satisfaction of needs that are essential to happiness and survival, a child will become increasingly anxious. This, in turn, activates the parts of the brain that control instinctive survival responses and deactivates those parts of the brain that are responsible for logical thinking, planning, and effective action. As a result, such a child becomes demanding and difficult to reason with, and gaining satisfaction of their needs becomes the most important objective.

This response restricts a child’s range of interest and behaviour, and limits his capacity to lead life to the full and perform daily tasks. It’s a trait most obvious among maltreated children who exhibit a limited range of interests and a propensity to engage in controlling and coercive patterns when relating to others, especially parents or other adults in a care-giving role

Consistently demonstrating understanding and responding to your child’s real needs, including his need for our love, attention, acceptance and protection, is immensely reassuring. Once reassured that he can rely on you to consistently respond, your child can, like Daniel, get on with exploring all that the world has to offer without experiencing the debilitating and restricting effects of anxiety.

Finally, your child’s perception of himself is very much influenced by his experience of how others, particularly his parents, perceive him. When you predominantly perceive your child to be safe and capable, your child will see generally himself in the same way. So, have positive expectations of your child. It will support his resiliency, and help him to flourish ■

*Colby Pearce is author of A Short Introduction To Promoting Resilience In Children (Jessica Kingsley, £12.99). To buy this book at the special price of £11.99 (including p&sp), tel: 020 7833 2307 or visit [www.jkp.com](http://www.jkp.com) and quote PEAFUN.*

