

If your child struggles to bounce back from adversity, psychologist Justin Coulson suggests ways to make them mentally stronger. **LISA SALMON** reports

Teach your children to toughen up



DOES your child give up too easily, or fail to recover after even the smallest of setbacks? If so, they need to build resilience – with your help.

Encouraging a child to toughen up mentally may sound a daunting task in itself, but luckily psychologist Dr Justin Coulson is here to give guidance. He has written a new book *9 Ways to a Resilient Child* (HarperCollins, £12.99) in a bid to help children spring back from difficulties.

He says: “Resilience means we bounce back from challenges and adversity, and that our developmental progress isn’t thwarted by difficult – even traumatic – circumstances.

“The idea of resilience resonates with parents worried their children are somehow not coping, or may not be able to cope in the future. Parents want to know how to help their children be more resilient.”

Dr Coulson says the



Dr Justin Coulson

environment in which children are raised, and the psychological, social and emotional habits they are taught, can boost their resilience, and adds: “We have good evidence to show we can make ourselves, our children, our families and our communities more resilient.

“And there are few legacies we can leave that are greater than the legacy of resilience and wellbeing.”

Here, he outlines nine ways to help a child become more resilient:

1. BUILD IDENTITY

CHILDREN need a strong sense of identity, knowing who they are and how they fit into the world.

Dr Coulson says studies show there are practical strategies for helping children work this out: Things like sharing family stories about when mum did something brave, or maybe when dad made a difference in the community.

Or parents could ask children

questions such as, ‘What would you do if you were in that situation?’ to help them identify that they’re ‘a helper’ or perhaps someone who is kind.

2. TEACH FLEXIBILITY

CHILDREN need to learn how to be flexible, as this builds resilience. This simply means they aren’t rigid in their thinking, so if something unpleasant happens they know how to ‘roll with it’.

“Unfortunately, a lot of kids get stuck when things get tough,” says Dr Coulson. “There’s fight, there’s flight, and there’s freeze. Each of these responses emphasises a narrow way of looking at a challenge – and these responses are built on emotion.

“Resilient responses are the ones where our kids recognise things are tough and they find a solution. They step back from the intensity of the situation and look for alternative ways of moving forward with a flexible approach.”

3. ENCOURAGE SELF-CONTROL

SELF-CONTROL sets children up

Encouraging resilience in our children will mean they’re better prepared to face challenges

to be more resilient, stresses Dr Coulson. Children who can delay gratification tend to be psychologically stronger and can manage themselves better when things don’t work out. This helps them to bounce back.

4. AVOID ‘STINKING THINKING’

STUDIES show the way children think about life and struggle can dramatically affect their responses to challenges. This ‘stinking thinking’ leads to kids crumbling in the face of adversity, thinking, ‘This always happens to me. It’s not fair. I’m hopeless.’

Dr Coulson says: “If we can help children reframe their thoughts, they can see adversity as something that makes them stronger rather than something that weakens them.”

5. DEVELOP A GROWTH MINDSET

DR Coulson says the concept of a ‘growth mindset’ can best be described in the words of Henry Ford, who said: “Whether you think you can or think you can’t, you’re right.”

But it’s more than just positive self-talk, it’s recognising the brain is like a muscle. “When you work it, your brain gets stronger. Helping children understand growth mindset can foster resilience, even in kids who think they’re dumb. They come to see they just need to exercise their brain more.”

6. TALK ABOUT THEIR STRENGTHS

RESEARCH shows resilience is

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strengthened by focusing on children’s strengths, rather than their weaknesses.

“When we focus on strengths, we emphasise what’s right with them instead of what’s wrong,” says Dr Coulson. “And we accelerate their resilience when we find ways to encourage them to use their strengths every day – especially for helping others.”

7. MORE GREEN TIME, LESS SCREEN TIME

DR Coulson says it will be years before the full effects of the “screen tsunami” that has swept society are known.

However, he insists there’s enough evidence to be clear about two things: Too much screen time, or the wrong kind of content, is having some impact on resilience, and time spent in nature is a proven resilience and wellbeing booster.

“It provides food for the soul,” he says of being outdoors. “Encouraging green time and healthy physical activity over screen time is a must for parents who want to raise resilient kids.”

8. ENCOURAGE AUTONOMY

CHILDREN feel strong and capable when they make their own choices and are responsible for their lives, but Dr Coulson points out that we can’t have responsible kids if we don’t give them responsibility.

He says parents offering children choice rather than being too controlling is a powerful way to encourage resilience, and adds: “By getting out of their way, they learn to make decisions, experience natural consequences, and experience a sense of capability and mastery.”

9. MAKE RELATIONSHIPS RIGHT

DR Coulson says the most vital ingredient in fostering resilience is relationships. This means having a strong support network to pick children up when they’re down, to offer encouragement, and to love them no matter what.

“This appears to be the most surefire way to raise resilience,” he says. “When life puts our kids in a tight spot and challenges arise, we don’t want our kids to moan, ‘Why me?’. Instead, we want them to stand tall, strong, resilient, and calmly say, ‘Try me.’”