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**The Power of Parenting**  
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I have focused for more than 20 years on examining the impact that parents have in nurturing hope, self-esteem, and an optimistic outlook in their children (Brooks, 1999; Brooks & Goldstein, 2001, 2003). My intention in this chapter is to examine specific steps that parents can take on a daily basis to reinforce a resilient mindset and lifestyle in their children. Before describing both the characteristics of this mindset and strategies to strengthen it in youngsters, I believe it is necessary to address the following two questions:

1. What is meant by the concept of resilience?
2. Do parents *really* have a major influence on the development of resilience in their children?

**What Is Resilience?**

Resilience may be understood as the capacity of a child to deal effectively with stress and pressure, to cope with everyday challenges, to rebound from disappointments, mistakes, trauma, and adversity, to develop clear and realistic goals, to solve problems, to interact comfortably with others, and to treat oneself and others with respect and dignity (Brooks & Goldstein, 2001).

In scientific circles research related to resilience has primarily studied youngsters who have overcome trauma and hardship (Beardslee & Podorefsky, 1988; Brooks, 1994; Hechtman, 1991; Herrenkohl, Herrenkohl, & Egolf, 1994; Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990; Rutter, 1985; Werner & Smith, 1992). However, several researchers and clinicians have raised important issues, such as: “Does a child have to face adversity in order to be considered resilient?” or “Is resilience reflected in the ability to bounce back from adversity or is it caused by adversity?” (see Kaplan, 2004 this volume for a thoughtful discussion of this issue).

My colleague Sam Goldstein and I believe that the concept of resilience should be broadened to apply to every child and not restricted to those who have experienced adversity (Brooks & Goldstein, 2001, 2003). All children face challenge and stress in the course of their development and even those who at one point would not be classified as “at-risk” may suddenly find themselves placed in such a category. This abrupt shift to an at-risk classification was evident on a dramatic scale for the hundreds of children who lost a parent or loved one as a consequence of the terrorist attacks on 9/11. Nurturing resilience should be understood as a vital ingredient in the process of parenting every child whether that child has been burdened by adversity or not.

Other mental health specialists have also expanded the definition or scope of resilience to go beyond bouncing back from adversity. Reivich and Shatte (2002) contend that “everyone needs resilience” and they write:

. . . resilience is the capacity to respond in healthy and productive ways when faced with adversity and trauma; it is essential for managing the daily stress of life. But we have come to realize that the same skills of resilience are important

to broadening and enriching one's life as they are to recovering from setbacks. (p. 20)

A more inclusive definition of resilience that embraces all youngsters encourages us to consider and adopt parenting practices that are essential for preparing children for success and satisfaction in their future lives. A guiding principle in each interaction parents have with children should be to strengthen their ability to meet life's challenges with thoughtfulness, confidence, purpose, responsibility, empathy, and hope. These qualities may be subsumed under the concept of resilience. The development of a resilient mindset, which will be described in detail later in this chapter, is not rooted in the number of adversities experienced by a child, but rather in particular skills and a positive attitude that caregivers reinforce in a child.

### **Do Parents Have a Major Influence on the Development of Resilience in Their Children?**

Many people, convinced of the profound influence that parents exert on a child's development and resilience, might wonder why it is necessary to pose this question. However, the answer is not as clearcut as many may believe (Goldstein & Brooks, 2003). Recently developed, sophisticated scientific instruments have highlighted the significant impact of genetics on adult personality, adaptation, and cognitive and behavioral patterns. As a consequence, the degree to which parents influence their child's development has been questioned by several researchers (Harris, 1998; Pinker, 2002).

In her book *The Nurture Assumption*, Harris (1998) presented evidence to suggest that the extended environment outside of the home, particularly the impact of peers, explained much of the non-genetic differences in human behavioral traits. Though some have lauded Harris for her contribution to the field of child development, she has also been widely criticized by professionals who have interpreted her conclusions as suggesting that parents are inconsequential players in their children's lives (Pinker, 2002).

However, Harris' position may be interpreted not as a dismissal of the influence of parents, but rather as a call to be more precise in understanding the impact of parents on the present and ultimately, future lives of their children. Pinker (2002), citing a number of studies of fraternal and identical twins reared together or apart, contends that it is not that parents don't matter; they in fact matter a great deal. It's that over the long term, parent behavior does not appear to significantly influence a child's intelligence or personality.

The position taken in this chapter is that even if those personality qualities in a child attributed to parental influence are in a statistical equation much smaller than previously assumed, they may in the daily lives of children be the difference in determining whether or not a child succeeds in school, develops satisfying peer relationships, or overcomes a developmental or behavioral impairment. Parents possess enormous influence in the lives of their children. Data suggesting that a particular parenting style may play a minimal role in intelligence or personality development does not absolve parents of their responsibility to raise their children in moral, ethical, and humane ways. The quality of daily parent-child relationships makes a vital difference in the behavior and adjustment of children. As Sheridan, Dowd, and Eagle (2004) note, "The development of resiliency and healthy adjustment among children is enhanced through empathetic family involvement practices" (p. this volume).

Not surprisingly, the impact of parental behavior on children is less debatable when the behavior in question is inappropriate, humiliating, or abusive compared with that which is positive or benign. For example, Jaffee (2004) has highlighted the devastating effects on a child's emotional well-being and resilience when confronted with parents who have a history of mental disorder and also engage in violent and abusive behavior. Kumpfer and Alvarado (2003), emphasizing the significance of parental behavior write:

The probability of a youth acquiring developmental problems increases rapidly as risk factors such as family conflict, lack of parent-child bonding, disorganization, ineffective parenting, stressors, parental depression, and others increase in comparison with protective or resilience factors. Hence, family protective mechanisms and individual resiliency processes should be addressed in addition to reducing risk factors. . . . Resiliency research suggests that parental support in helping children develop dreams, goals, and purpose in life is a major protective factor. (p. 458)

Pinker (2002) notes, "Childrearing is above all an ethical responsibility. It is not okay for parents to beat, humiliate, deprive, or neglect their children because those are awful things for a big strong person to do to a small helpless one" (p. 398). Similarly, Harris writes, "If you don't think the moral imperative is a good enough reason to be nice to your kid, try this one: Be nice to your kid when he's young so that he will be nice to you when you're old" (p. 342).

Pinker (2002) poignantly captures the moral dimension of parenting practices in the following statement:

There are well-functioning adults who still shake with rage when recounting the cruelties their parents inflicted on them as children. There are others who moisten up in private moments when recalling a kindness or sacrifice made for their happiness, perhaps one that the mother or father has long forgotten. If for no other reason, parents should treat their children well to allow them to grow up with such memories. (p. 399)

Given the complexity of a child's development, it is unlikely that a specific number will ever be assigned as a "parent's share" or percentage of that development. As Deater-Deckard, Ivy, and Lynch (2004) wisely observe, "The question is no longer whether and to what degree genes or environments matter, but how genes and environments work together to produce resilient children and adults" (p. this volume). They conclude:

. . . resilience is a developmental process that involves individual differences in children's attributes (e.g., temperament, cognitive abilities) and environments (e.g., supportive parenting, learning enriched classrooms). The genetic and environmental influences underlying these individual differences are correlated, and they interact with each other to produce the variation that we see between children, and over time within children. . . . It is imperative that scientists and practitioners recognize that these gene-environment transactions are probabilistic in their effects, and the transactions and their effects can change with shifts in genes or environments. (p. )

While researchers and clinicians may debate the extent to which particular parenting practices impact on children in specified areas, it seems that all agree that

parents make a significant difference either in the day-to-day and/or future lives of their children. We concur with this position and believe that it is essential that we identify both those parental practices that nurture the skills, positive outlook, and stress hardiness necessary for children to manage an increasingly complex and demanding world as well as those that do harm to children. We must search for consistent ways of raising children that will increase the likelihood of their experiencing happiness, success in school, contentment in their lives, and satisfying relationships. If children are to realize these goals they must develop the inner strength to deal competently and successfully, day after day, with the challenges and pressures they encounter (Brooks & Goldstein, 2001).

### **The Characteristics of a Resilient Mindset**

Resilient children possess certain qualities and/or ways of viewing themselves and the world that are not apparent in youngsters who have not been successful in meeting challenges. The assumptions that children have about themselves influence the behaviors and skills they develop. In turn, these behaviors and skills influence this set of assumptions so that a dynamic process is constantly operating. This set of assumptions may be classified as a mindset (Brooks & Goldstein, 2001).

An understanding of the features of a resilient mindset can provide parents with guideposts for nurturing inner strength and optimism in their children. Parents adhering to these guideposts can use each interaction with their children to reinforce a resilient mindset. While the outcome of a specific situation may be important, even more essential are the lessons learned from the process of dealing with each issue or problem. The knowledge gained supplies the nutrients from which the seeds of resiliency will flourish.

The mindset of resilient children contains a number of noteworthy characteristics that are associated with specific skills. These include:

They feel special and appreciated.

They have learned to set realistic goals and expectations for themselves.

They believe that they have the ability to solve problems and make sound decisions and thus are more likely to view mistakes, setbacks, and obstacles as challenges to confront rather than as stressors to avoid.

They rely on effective coping strategies that promote growth and are not self-defeating.

They are aware of and do not deny their weaknesses and vulnerabilities but view them as areas for improvement rather than as unchangeable flaws.

They recognize and enjoy their strong points and talents.

Their self-concept is filled with images of strength and competence.

They feel comfortable with others and have developed effective interpersonal skills with peers and adults alike. This enables them to seek out assistance and nurturance in a comfortable, appropriate manner from adults who can provide the support they need.

They are able to define the aspects of their lives over which they have control and to focus their energy and attention on those rather than on factors over which they have little, or any, influence.

The process of nurturing this mindset and associated skills in children requires parents to examine their own mindset, beliefs, and actions. We will now examine guideposts that can facilitate this process together with case examples.

### Parenting Practices that Nurture Resilience in Children

Following is a list of ten guideposts proposed by Brooks and Goldstein (2001, 2003) that form the scaffolding for reinforcing a resilient mindset and lifestyle in children. These guideposts are relevant for all interactions parents and other caregivers have with children whether coaching them in a sport, helping them with homework, engaging them in an art project, asking them to assume certain responsibilities, assisting them when they make mistakes, teaching them to share, or disciplining them. While the specific avenues through which these guideposts can be applied will differ from one child and one situation to the next, the guideposts themselves remain constant.

**1. Being Empathic.** A basic foundation of any relationship is empathy. Simply defined, in the parenting relationship empathy is the capacity of parents to place themselves inside the shoes of their children and to see the world through their eyes. Empathy does not imply that you agree with what your children do, but rather you attempt to appreciate and validate their point of view. Also, it is easier for children to develop empathy when they interact with adults who model empathy on a daily basis.

It is not unusual for parents to believe they are empathic, but the reality is that empathy is more fragile or elusive than many realize. Experience shows that it is easier to be empathic when our children do what we ask them to do, meet our expectations, and are warm and loving. Being empathic is tested when we are upset, angry, or disappointed with our children. When parents feel this way, many will say or do things that actually work against a child developing resilience.

To strengthen empathy, parents must keep in mind several key questions, questions that I frequently pose in my clinical practice and workshops. They include:

“How would I feel if someone said or did to me what I just said or did to my child?”

“When I say or do things with my children, am I behaving in a way that will make them most responsive to listening to me?”

“How would I hope my child described me?”

“Do I behave in ways that would prompt my child to describe me in the way I hope?”

“How would my child actually describe me and how close is that to how I hope my child would describe me?”

While thinking about these questions are essential features of effective parenting, they are often neglected when parents are confronted with frustration and anger. This is evident in the following two case examples.

Mr. and Mrs. Kahn were perplexed why their son John, a seventh grader, experienced so much difficulty completing his homework. John was an excellent athlete but had a long history of struggling to learn to read. His parents, noticing John’s lack of interest in school activities, believed he was “lazy” and he could do the work if he “put his mind to it.” They often exhorted him to “try harder” and they angrily reminded him on a regular basis how awful he would feel as a senior in high school when he was not accepted into the college of his choice.

While perhaps well-intentioned, when Mr. and Mrs. Kahn told John to “try harder” they failed to consider how these words were experienced by their son. Many youngsters who are repeatedly told to “try harder” interpret this statement not as helpful or encouraging but rather as judgmental and accusatory, intensifying their frustration

rather than their motivation to improve. Thus, the words the Kahns used worked against their goal to motivate John. If they had reflected upon how they would feel if they were having difficulty at work and their boss yelled, "Try harder," they may have refrained from using these words.

Mr. and Mrs. Kahn learned that by placing themselves inside John's shoes, they could communicate with him in ways that would lessen defensiveness and increase cooperation. They told him that they realized they came across as "nagging" but did not wish to do so. They said that they knew he possessed many strengths but there were areas that were more challenging for him such as reading. By being empathic they transformed an accusatory attitude into a problem-solving framework by asking John what he thought would help. This more positive approach made it easier for John to acknowledge his difficulties in school and prompted his willingness to receive tutoring.

Sally, a shy eight-year-old, was frequently reminded by her parents, Mr. and Mrs. Carter, to say hello when encountering family or friends. Yet, from a young age Sally's temperament left her feeling anxious, fearful, and easily overwhelmed in new situations. It was not unusual for Sally to seek refuge behind her mother when people she did not know visited the Carter home. Both of the Carters were outgoing and were perplexed by Sally's cautiousness and fearfulness, especially since they viewed themselves as supportive and loving parents. They felt that Sally could be less shy "if she just put her mind to it."

The Carters became increasingly frustrated and embarrassed by Sally's behavior, prompting them to warn her that if she failed to say hello to others she would be lonely and have no friends. They frequently asked her after school if she had taken the initiative to speak with any of the children in her class. These kinds of comments backfired, prompting Sally to become more anxious.

Mr. and Mrs. Carter, desiring their daughter to be more outgoing, failed to appreciate that Sally's cautious demeanor was an inborn temperamental trait and could not be overcome by simply telling her to "say hello" to others. They were to discover that each reminder on their part not only intensified Sally's discomfort and worry but also compromised a warm, supportive relationship with their daughter.

In parent counseling sessions the Carters learned that they could assist Sally to be less shy, but they first had to reflect upon how their current actions and words impacted on their daughter. They had to ask, "If I were shy would I want anyone to say to me what I say to Sally?" or "Am I saying things to Sally that are helping or hindering the process of her becoming more comfortable with others?" In essence, these kinds of questions helped them to assume a more empathic stance. Both parents learned that telling a shy person to try to become less shy is often experienced as accusatory and not as a source of encouragement.

Mr. and Mrs. Carter informed Sally that they knew that it was not easy for her to say hello to people she did not know and added that it was not easy for many other children as well. They said that maybe working together with Sally they could figure out steps she could take to make it less difficult to greet others. These comments served to empathize and validate what Sally was experiencing and also to convey a feeling of "we're here to help, not criticize." Finally, they communicated to Sally, "Many kids who have trouble saying hello when they're young, find it easier as they get older." This last

statement conveyed realistic hope. And hope is a basic characteristic of a resilient mindset.

Being empathic permitted the Carters to communicate with Sally in a nonjudgmental way and in the process they nurtured their daughter's resilience.

**2. Communicating Effectively and Listening Actively.** Empathy is closely associated with the ways in which parents communicate with their children. Communication is not simply how we speak with another person. Effective communication involves actively listening to our children, understanding and validating what they are attempting to say, and responding in ways that avoid power struggles by not interrupting them, by not telling them how they should be feeling, by not derogating them, and by not using absolute words such as *always* and *never* in an overly critical, demeaning fashion (e.g., "You never help out"; "You always act disrespectful").

Resilient children demonstrate a capacity to communicate their feelings and thoughts effectively and their parents serve as important models in the process. When 10-year-old Michael insisted on completing a radio kit by himself and then was not able to do so, his father, Mr. Burton, angrily retorted, "I told you it wouldn't work. You don't have enough patience to read the directions carefully." Mr. Burton's message worked against the development of a resilient mindset in his son since it contained an accusatory tone, a tone focusing on Michael's shortcomings rather than on his strengths. It did not offer assistance or hope.

Covey (1989), describing the characteristics of effective people, advocates that we first attempt to understand before being understood. What he is suggesting is that prior to expressing our views, we would be well advised to practice empathy by listening actively and considering what messages the other person is delivering. Effective communication is implicated in many behaviors associated with resilience, including interpersonal skills, empathy, and problem-solving and decision-making abilities.

Given the significance of effective communication skills in our lives, during my therapeutic activities and my workshops I frequently pose the following questions for parents to consider when they interact with their children:

"Do my messages convey and teach respect?"

"Am I fostering realistic expectations in my children?"

"Am I helping my children learn how to solve problems?"

"Am I nurturing empathy and compassion?"

"Am I promoting self-discipline and self-control?"

"Am I setting limits and consequences in ways that permit my children to learn from me rather than resent me?"

"Am I truly listening to and validating what my children are saying?"

"Do my children know that I value their opinion and input?"

"Do my children know how special they are to me?"

"Am I assisting my children to appreciate that mistakes and obstacles are part of the process of learning and growing?"

"Am I comfortable in acknowledging my own mistakes and apologizing to my children when indicated?"

If parents keep these questions in mind, they can communicate in ways that reinforce a resilient mindset. However, this task is not always easy to accomplish as was evident at a family session with Mr. and Mrs. Berlin and their 13-year-old daughter

Jennifer. The Berlins sought a consultation given Jennifer's sadness and what they called "her pessimistic attitude towards everything."

At the first session, Jennifer said, "I feel very sad and unhappy."

Mrs. Berlin instantly countered, "But there's no reason for you to feel this way. We are a loving family and have always given you what you need."

Jennifer's expression suggested both sadness and anger at her mother's remark. While Mrs. Berlin may have intended to reassure her daughter, her comment served to rupture communication. People do not want to be told how they should or should not feel. If someone says she feels depressed, she does not want to hear that there is no reason to feel this way.

What might Mrs. Berlin have said? A good place to start is validation. Parents must first validate what their child is saying. Validation does not mean you agree with the other person's statement, but that you convey to that person you "hear" what is being said. Consider the following response that Mrs. Berlin might have offered:

"I know you've been feeling depressed. I'm not certain why, but I'm glad you could tell us. That's why we're seeing Dr. Brooks to try and figure out what will help you to feel better and also, how dad and I can help."

If the messages of parents are filled with empathy, validation, and support, a climate is established for nurturing resilience.

**3. Changing Negative Scripts.** Well-meaning parents have been known to apply the same approach with their children for weeks, months, or years even when the approach has proven ineffective. For instance, a set of parents reminded (nagged) their children for years to clean their rooms, but the children failed to comply. When I asked why they used the same unsuccessful message for years, they responded, "We thought they would finally learn if we told them often enough."

Similar to the reasoning offered by these parents, many parents believe that children should be the ones to change, not them. Others believe if they change their approach, it is like "giving in to a child" and they are concerned that their children will take advantage of them. One mother said, "My son forgets to do his chores and I keep reminding him and we keep getting into battles. But I can't back off. If I do my son will never learn to be responsible. He will become a spoiled brat like too many other kids are these days." Without realizing it, the mother's constant reminders backfired. They not only contributed to tension in the household, but in addition, they reinforced a lack of responsibility in her son by always being there to remind him of what he was expected to do rather than having him learn to remember his responsibilities on his own.

Parents with a resilient mindset of their own recognize that if something they have said or done for a reasonable amount of time does not work, then they must change their "script" if their children are to change theirs. This position does not mean giving in to the child or failing to hold the child accountable. It suggests that we must have the insight and courage to consider what we can do differently, lest we become entangled in useless, counterproductive power struggles. It also serves to teach children that there are alternatives ways of solving problems. If anything, it helps children learn to be more flexible and accountable in handling difficult situations.

Mr. Lowell was imprisoned by a negative script, especially towards his 12-year-old son Jimmy. The moment Mr. Lowell arrived home, the first question he asked Jimmy each and every day was, "Did you do your homework? Did you do your chores?" Even



if Jimmy had not done his homework or chores, he quickly responded “yes” just to “get my father off my back.” Over several years their relationship deteriorated. Jimmy felt all his father cared about were grades and chores. Mr. Lowell felt his son was “lazy” and needed daily “prodding” to become more responsible.

In counseling sessions, Mr. Lowell became aware of how his words echoed those of his father when Mr. Lowell was Jimmy’s age. With impressive insight he said, “Jimmy must see me just like I saw my father, an overbearing man who rarely complimented me but was quick to tell me what I did wrong.”

Mr. Lowell ruefully asked, “Why do we do the same things toward our kids that we didn’t like our parents doing to us?”

It is a question frequently raised. While the answer may differ to some extent from one person to the next, the basic issue is how easily we become creatures of habit, incorporating the script of our own parents even if we were not happy with that script. We practice what we have learned.

Yet, parents are not destined to follow these ineffective, counterproductive scripts. Once they are aware of their existence they can consider other scripts to follow. Mr. Lowell, equipped with new insight, no longer greeted Jimmy with questions about his homework or chores, but instead showed interest in his son’s various activities, including drawing and basketball. He and Jimmy signed up for an art class together offered by a local museum and they “practiced hoops” on a regular basis. Similar to the Kahn’s approach with John and the Carter’s with Sally, Mr. Lowell recognized that if Jimmy were to change, he, as the adult, would have to make the initial changes.

**4. Loving Our Children in Ways that Help Them to Feel Special and Appreciated.** It is well established that a basic foundation of resilience is the presence of at least one adult (hopefully several) who believes in the worth and goodness of the child. The late psychologist Julius Segal referred to that person as a “charismatic adult,” an adult from whom a child “gathers strength” (Segal, 1988). One must never underestimate the power of one person to redirect a child toward a more productive, successful, satisfying life.

Parents, keeping in mind the notion of a charismatic adult, might ask each evening, “Are my children stronger people because of the things I said or did today or are they less strong?” Certainly, Mr. Burton yelling at his son Michael when the latter had difficulty completing a radio kit or Mr. and Mrs. Carter questioning Sally each day if she had initiated conversations with classmates were actions that diminished their children’s emotional well-being. Neither Michael nor Sally was likely to gather strength when confronted with their parents’ statements and questions.

Unconditional love, which we will discuss in greater detail in the next guidepost, is an essential feature that charismatic adults bestow on children. If children are to develop a sense of security, self-worth, and self-dignity, they must have people in their lives who demonstrate love not because of something they accomplish but because of their very existence. When such love is absent, it is difficult to develop and fortify a resilient mindset.

When I have asked adults to recall a favorite occasion from their childhood when their parents served as a charismatic adult for them, one of the most common memories involved doing something pleasant and alone with the parent. One man described having his father’s “undivided attention.” He said, “My father really listened to me when

no one else was around and we could talk about anything. It was tougher to do when my older sister and younger brother were also there.”

Similarly, a woman said, “I loved bedtime when my mother or father read me a story. If my mother was reading to me, my father was reading to my brother. If my father was reading to me, my mother was reading to my brother.” With a smile, this woman added, “Don’t get me wrong, I loved my brother and I enjoyed when we did things as a family, but I think I felt closest to my parents when I did something alone with each. My husband and I do the same things with our kids today.”

The power of “special times,” poignantly captured in the words of this man and woman, are recalled by many adults. It is recommended that parents create these times in the lives of their children. Parents of young children might say, “When I read to you or play with you, it is so special that even if the phone rings I won’t answer it.” One young child said, “I know my parents love me. They let the answering machine answer calls when they are playing with me.”

When children know that they will have a time alone with each parent, it helps to lessen sibling rivalry and vying for the parent’s undivided attention. A parent of six children asked at a workshop, “Is it possible to create special moments with each child when you have six.” The answer is that it is more difficult with six than with two children in the household, but it is still possible. It requires more juggling, but if these times result in children feeling special in the eyes of their parents, the struggle to juggle one’s schedule is worth the effort. As Pinker (2002) advised, “If for no other reason, parents should treat their children well to allow them to grow up with such memories” (p. 399).

Children are very sensitive if a parent is not present at their birthday, at a holiday, at their first Little League game, or at a talent show. In today’s fast-paced world many parents work long hours and travel and thus, it is likely they may miss some of their children’s special moments, but these absences should be kept to a minimum. One adult patient recalled that his father missed all but a couple of his birthdays between the ages of 5 and 12. “I know he had to travel for his business, but he knew when my birthday was. I think he could have scheduled his business trips to be there for my birthday.” Tears came to his eyes as he added, “You certainly don’t feel loved when your father misses your birthday. And to make matters worse, most of the time he forgot to call.”

Time alone with each child does not preclude family activities that also create a sense of belonging and love. Sharing evening meals and holidays, playing games, attending a community event as a family, or taking a walk together are all opportunities to convey love and help children feel special in the eyes and hearts of their parents.

**5. Accepting Our Children for Who They Are and Helping Them to Establish Realistic Expectations and Goals.** One of the most difficult but challenging parenting tasks is to accept our children for who they are and not what we want them to be. Before children are born parents have expectations for them that may be unrealistic given the unique temperament of each child. Chess and Thomas (1987), two of the pioneers in measuring temperamental differences in newborns, observed that some youngsters enter the world with so-called easy temperaments, others with cautious or shy temperaments, while still others with “difficult” temperaments.

When parents lack knowledge about these inborn temperaments, a powerful determinant of personality and behavior according to Harris (1998), they may say or do

things that compromise satisfying relationships and interfere with the emergence of a resilient mindset. This dynamic certainly occurred in Mr. and Mrs. Carter's initial approach to their daughter Sally's shy demeanor. Basically, they exhorted her to make friends, feeling that her cautious, reserved nature could easily be overcome. They did not appreciate how desperately Sally wished to be more outgoing and have more friends, but it was difficult to do so given her temperament. It was only when her parents demonstrated empathy and communicated their wish to help, that Sally felt accepted.

Another example concerned ten-year-old Carl. He dawdled in the morning, often missing the school bus. His parents, Mr. and Mrs. Thomas, found themselves obligated to drive him to school. A neighbor suggested they not drive Carl to school, that by doing so they were just "reinforcing his lateness." They took this neighbor's advice and told Carl if he was not ready when the school bus arrived, they would not drive him and he would miss school. Carl missed school, which upset him. However, much to the dismay of his parents, his upset did not prepare him to be ready for school the next day. They were confused about what to do next and became increasingly angry with their son for his irresponsibility. As a further motivation to be ready on time, they decided to restrict many of his pleasurable activities if he were late. Unfortunately, that failed to bring about the desired results.

Carl's parents were unaware that his difficulty with lateness was not because he was irresponsible, but rather because he moved at a slow pace and was distractible, frequently becoming drawn into other activities. Instead of yelling and punishing, it would have been more effective to accept that this is their son's style and to engage him in a discussion of what he thinks would help to get ready on time. As we shall see under the eighth guidepost discussed below, when given the opportunity even young children are capable of offering sound solutions to problems they encounter.

In addition, collaborating with Carl's school to have a motivating "job" or responsibility waiting for him might have provided a positive incentive to assist him to consider ways to be ready on time even with his slower temperament. I frequently use such a strategy. A child with whom I worked who was tardy on a regular basis was given the job of "tardy monitor" at his school, a position that entailed arriving early and keeping track of which students were late. The child loved the responsibility and arrived on time with renewed purpose.

Accepting children for who they are and appreciating their different temperaments does not imply that we excuse inappropriate, unacceptable behavior but rather that we understand this behavior and help to modify it in a manner that does not assault a child's self-esteem and sense of dignity. It means developing realistic goals and expectations for our children. Fortunately, in the past 10-15 years there have been an increasing number of publications to help parents and teachers appreciate, accept, and respond effectively to a child's temperament and learning style (Carey, 1997; Keogh, 2003; Kurcinka, 1991; Levine, 2002, 2003; Sachs, 2001).

**6. Helping Our Children Experience Success by Identifying and Nurturing Their "Islands of Competence."** Resilient children do not deny problems that they may face. Such denial runs counter to mastering challenges. However, in addition to acknowledging and confronting problems, youngsters who are resilient are able to identify and utilize their strengths. Unfortunately, many children who feel poorly about themselves and their abilities experience a diminished sense of hope. Parents sometimes

report that the positive comments they offer their children fall on “deaf ears,” resulting in parents’ becoming frustrated and reducing positive feedback.

It is important for parents to be aware that when children lack self-worth they are less receptive to accepting positive feedback. Parents should continue to offer this feedback, but must recognize that true self-esteem, hope, and resilience are based on children experiencing success in areas of their lives that they and significant others deem to be important. This requires parents to identify and reinforce a child’s “islands of competence.” Every child possesses these islands of competence or areas of strength and we must nurture these rather than overemphasize the child’s weakness.

During an evaluation of a child, I regularly ask the parents to describe their child’s islands of competence. I ask the child to do the same, often via the question, “What do you think you do well?” or “What do you see as your strengths?” For children who respond, “I don’t know,” I answer, “That’s okay, it can take time to figure out what we’re good at, but it’s important to figure out.” If we are to reinforce a more optimistic attitude in children, it is imperative that we place the spotlight on strengths and assist children to articulate the strengths that they possess.

One problem related to the issue of acceptance discussed in the previous guidepost, is when parents minimize the importance of their child’s island of competence. For example, thirteen-year-old George struggled with learning problems. Unlike his parents, Mr. and Mrs. White, or his sixteen-year-old sister, Linda, he was not gifted academically or athletically. When his parents were asked during an evaluation to identify George’s islands of competence, they responded with an intriguing, “We’re somewhat embarrassed to tell you. We just don’t think it’s the kind of activity that a thirteen-year-old boy should be spending much of his time doing.”

Eventually, Mr. White revealed, “George likes to garden and take care of plants. That would be okay if he did well in school and was involved in other activities. How can a thirteen-year-old boy be so interested in plants?”

Rather than my finding fault with the Whites’ reactions to George’s interests, it was vital to help them understand the importance of identifying and building on his strengths even if those strengths were not initially valued by them. To be resilient children need to feel that they are skilled in at least one or two areas that are esteemed by others.

Clinicians and educators should insure that treatment and educational plans begin with a list of the child’s strengths and include strategies that can be used to reinforce and display these strengths for others to see and praise. Of what use are a child’s strengths if they are not observed and supported by others?

Laurie, a teenager, had difficulty getting along with her peers, but young children gravitated towards her. Her parents described her as the “pied piper” of the neighborhood. Given this strength, she began to baby-sit. As the responsibilities involved with baby-sitting helped her to develop confidence, she was more willing to examine and change her approach with her peers, which led to greater acceptance. Similarly, 10-year-old Brian, a boy with reading difficulties, had a knack for artwork, especially drawing cartoons. His parents and teachers displayed his cartoons at home and school, an action that boosted his self-esteem and in a concrete way communicated that his reading problems did not define him as a person, that he also possessed strengths.

When children discover their islands of competence, they are more willing to confront those areas that have been problematic for them. Adults must be sensitive to recognizing and bolstering these islands.

**7. Helping Children Realize that Mistakes Are Experiences from Which to Learn.** There is a significant difference in the way in which resilient children view mistakes compared with nonresilient children. Resilient children tend to perceive mistakes as opportunities for learning. In contrast, children who are not very hopeful often experience mistakes as an indication that they are failures. In response to this pessimistic view, they are likely to flee from challenges, feeling inadequate and often blaming others for their problems. If parents are to raise resilient children, they must help them develop a healthy attitude about mistakes from an early age.

The manner in which children respond to mistakes provides a significant window through which to assess their self-esteem and resilience. For example, in a Little League game two children struck out every time they came to bat. One child approached the coach after the game and said, “Coach, I keep striking out. Can you help me figure out what I’m doing wrong?” This response suggests a child with a resilient mindset, a child who entertains the belief that there are adults who can help him to lessen mistakes (strikeouts).

The second child, who unfortunately was not resilient, reacted to striking out by flinging his bat to the ground and screaming at the umpire, “You are blind, blind, blind! I wouldn’t strike out if you weren’t blind!” Much to the embarrassment of his parents he then ran off the field in tears, continuing to blame the umpire for striking out. Since this child did not believe he could improve, he coped with his sense of hopelessness by casting fault on others.

Parents can assist their children to develop a more constructive attitude about mistakes and setbacks. Two questions that can facilitate this task are to ask parents to consider what their children’s answers would be to the following questions:

“When your parents make a mistake, when something doesn’t go right, what do they do?”

“When you make a mistake, what do your parents say or do to you?”

In terms of the first question, parents serve as significant models for handling mistakes. It is easier for children to learn to deal more effectively with mistakes if they see their parents doing so. However, if they observe their parents blaming others or becoming very angry and frustrated when mistakes occur or offering excuses in order to avoid a task, they are more likely to develop a self-defeating attitude towards mistakes. In contrast, if they witness their parents use mistakes as opportunities for learning, they are more likely to do the same.

The second question also deserves serious consideration by parents. Many well-meaning parents become anxious and frustrated with their children’s mistakes. Given these feelings they may say or do things that contribute to their children fearing rather than learning from setbacks. For instance, parental frustration may lead to such comments as: “Were you using your brains?” or “You never think before you act!” or “I told you it wouldn’t work!” These and similar remarks serve to corrode a child’s sense of dignity and self-esteem.

No one likes to make mistakes or fail, but parents can use their children’s mistakes as teachable moments. They can engage their children in a discussion of what

they can do differently next time to maximize chances for success. Using empathy, they can refrain from saying things that they would not want said to them (e.g., how many parents would find it helpful if their spouse said to them, “Were you using your brains?”).

Parents must also have realistic expectations for their children and not set the bar too high or too low. If the bar is set too high, children will continually experience failure and are likely to feel they are a disappointment to their parents. Setting the bar too low may rob children of experiences that test their abilities and their capacity to learn to manage setbacks. Very low expectations also convey the message, “We don’t think you are capable.”

If parents are to reinforce a resilient mindset in their children, their words and actions must convey a belief that we can learn from mistakes. The fear of making mistakes and being humiliated is one of the most potent obstacles to learning, one that is incompatible with a resilient lifestyle.

**8. Developing Responsibility, Compassion, and a Social Conscience by Providing Children with Opportunities to Contribute.** Parents often ask what they can do to foster an attitude of responsibility, caring, and compassion in their children. One of the most effective ways of nurturing responsibility is offering children opportunities to help others. When children are enlisted in helping others and engaging in responsible behaviors, parents communicate trust in them and faith in their ability to handle a variety of tasks. In turn, involvement in these tasks reinforces several key characteristics of a resilient mindset including empathy, a sense of satisfaction in the positive impact of one’s behaviors, a more confident outlook as islands of competence are displayed, and the use of problem-solving skills.

Too often parents label the first responsibilities they give children “chores.” Most children and adults are not thrilled about doing chores, whereas almost every child from an early age appears motivated to help others. The presence of this “helping drive” is supported by research in which adults were asked to reflect on their school experiences and to write about one of their most positive moments in school that boosted their self-esteem and motivation (Brooks, 1991). The most frequently cited memory was being asked to assist others (e.g., tutoring a younger child, painting murals in the school, running the film projector, passing out the milk and straws).

To highlight the importance of teaching responsibility and compassion, I typically ask parents how their children would answer the following questions:

“What are the ways in which your parents show responsibility?”

“What behaviors have you observed in your parents that were not responsible?”

“What charitable activities have your parents been involved with in the past few months?”

“What charitable activities have they and you have been involved with together in the past few months?”

Parents would be well-advised to say as often as possible to their children, “We need your help” rather than “Remember to do your chores.” In addition, parents who involve their children in charitable endeavors, such as walks for hunger or AIDS or food drives, appreciate the value of such activities in fostering self-esteem and resilience. Responsibility and compassion are not promoted by parental “lectures” but rather by opportunities for children to assume a helping role and to become part of a “charitable family,” a family that is engaged in acts of compassion and giving.

**9. Teaching Our Children to Solve Problems and Make Decisions.** Children with high self-esteem and resilience believe that they are masters of their own fate and that they can define what they have control over and what is beyond their control. A vital ingredient of this feeling of control is the belief that when problems arise, they have the ability to solve problems and make decisions. Resilient children are able to articulate problems, consider different solutions, attempt what they judge to be the most appropriate solution, and learn from the outcome (Shure, 1996; Shure & Aberson, 2004).

If parents are to reinforce this problem-solving attitude in their children, they must refrain from constantly telling their children what to do. Instead it is more beneficial to encourage children to consider different possible solutions. To facilitate this process, parents might wish to establish a “family meeting time” every week or every other week during which problems facing family members can be discussed and solutions considered.

Jane, a nine-year-old girl, came home from school in tears and sobbed to her mother, Mrs. Jones, that some of her friends refused to sit with her at lunch, telling her they did not want her around. Jane felt confused and distressed and asked her mother what to do. Mrs. Jones immediately replied that Jane should tell the other girls that if they did not want to play with her, she did not want to play with them. While this motherly advice may have been appropriate, quickly telling Jane what to do and not involving her in a discussion of possible solutions took away an opportunity to strengthen her own problem-solving skills.

As another example, Barry and his older brother, Len, constantly bickered. According to their parents, Mr. and Mrs. Stern, they fought about everything, including who would sit in the front seat of the car and who would use the computer. Len was frequently reminded by his parents to be more tolerant since he was the older of the two. They warned him that his failure to comply with their request would result in punishment. Len’s response was to become angry and distant, feeling he was being treated unfairly. Eventually, the parents sat down with Barry and Len, shared with them the negative impact that their arguing was having on the family, and asked them to come up with possible solutions to particular problems and to select what they considered to be the best solution.

Much to the surprise of Mr. and Mrs. Stern, their sons came forth with solutions that were noteworthy for being grounded in simple rules. The boys decided that they would take turns sitting in the front seat as well as alternating every half hour in the use of the computer.

As Shure (1996) has found in her research, even preschool children can be assisted to develop effective and realistic ways of making choices and solving problems. When children initiate their own plans of action with the guidance of parents, their sense of ownership and control is reinforced, as is their resilience.

**10. Disciplining in Ways that Promote Self-Discipline and Self-Worth.** To be a disciplinarian is one of their most important roles that parents assume in nurturing resilience in their children. In this role parents must remember that the word *discipline* relates to the word *disciple* and thus is a teaching process. The ways in which children are disciplined can either reinforce or erode self-esteem, self-control, and resilience.

Two of the major goals of effective discipline are: (a) to ensure a safe and secure environment in which children understand and can define rules, limits, and consequences,

and (b) to reinforce self-discipline and self-control so that children incorporate these rules and apply them even when parents are not present. A lack of consistent, clear rules and consequences often contributes to chaos and to children feeling that their parents do not care about them. On the other hand, if parents are harsh and arbitrary, if they resort to yelling and spanking, children are likely to learn resentment rather than self-discipline.

There are several key principles that parents can follow to employ discipline techniques that are positive and effective. Given the significant role that discipline plays in parenting practices and in nurturing resilience, they are described in detail:

**Practice prevention.** It is vital for parents to become proactive rather than reactive in their interactions with their children, especially in regard to discipline. For example, discipline problems were minimized in one household when a young, hyperactive boy was permitted to get up from the dinner table when he could no longer remain seated. This approach proved far more effective than the previous one used by the parents, namely, to yell and punish him; when a punitive atmosphere was removed, this boy also learned greater self-control. In another home a boy's tantrums at bedtime ended when he was allowed to have a nightlight in his room and keep a photo of his parents by his bedside (both were his ideas to deal with nightmares he was experiencing).

**Work as a Parental Team.** In homes with two parents, it is important that parents set aside time for themselves to examine the expectations they have for their children as well as the discipline they use. This dialogue can also occur between divorced parents. While parents cannot and should not be clones of each other, they should strive to arrive at common goals and disciplinary practices, which most likely will involve negotiation and compromise. This negotiation should take place in private and not in front of their children.

**Be Consistent, Not Rigid.** The behavior of children sometimes renders consistency a Herculean task. Some children, based on past experience, believe that they can outlast their parents and that eventually their parents will succumb to their whining, crying, or tantrums. If guidelines and consequences have been established for acceptable behavior, it is important that parents adhere to them. However, parents must remember that consistency is not synonymous with rigidity or inflexibility. A consistent approach to discipline invites thoughtful modification of rules and consequences such as when a child reaches adolescence and is permitted to stay out later on the weekend. When modifications are necessary, they should be discussed with children so that they understand the reasons for the changes and can offer input.

**Select One's Battlegrounds Carefully.** Parents can find themselves reminding and disciplining their children all day long. It is important for parents to ask what behaviors merit discipline and which are not really relevant in terms of nurturing responsibility and resilience. Obviously, behaviors concerning safety deserve immediate attention. Other behaviors will be based on the particular values and expectations in the house. If children are punished for countless behaviors, if parents are constantly telling them what to do in an arbitrary manner, then the positive effects of discipline will be lost.

**Rely when Possible on Natural and Logical Consequences.** Children must learn that there are consequences for their behavior. It is best if these consequences are not harsh or arbitrary and are based on discussions that parents have had with their children. Discipline rooted in natural and logical consequences can be very effective. *Natural* consequences are those that result from a child's actions without parents having to



enforce them such as a child having a bicycle stolen because it was not placed in the garage. While *logical* consequences sometimes overlap with natural consequences, logical consequences involve some action taken on the part of parents in response to their child's behavior. Thus, if the child whose bicycle was stolen asked parents for money to purchase a new bicycle, a logical consequence would be for the parents to help the child figure out how to earn the money needed to pay for the new bicycle.

Positive Feedback and Encouragement Are Often the Most Powerful Forms of Discipline. Although most of the questions I am asked about discipline focus on negative consequences or punishment, it is important to appreciate the impact of positive feedback and encouragement as disciplinary approaches. Parents should "catch their children doing things right" and let them know when they do. Children crave the attention of their parents. It makes more sense to provide this attention for positive rather than negative behaviors. Well-timed positive feedback and expressions of encouragement and love are more valuable to children's self-esteem and resilience than stars or stickers. When children feel loved and appreciated, when they receive encouragement and support, they are less likely to engage in negative behaviors.

### **Concluding Remark**

Research may never be able to assign a precise percentage to capture the impact of a parent on a child's development. However, as noted earlier, whatever the percentage, we know that the day-to-day interactions parents have with their children are influential in determining the quality of lives that their children will lead. Parents can serve as charismatic adults to their children. They can assume this role by understanding and fortifying in their children the different characteristics of a resilient mindset, by believing in them, by conveying unconditional love, and by providing them with opportunities that reinforce their islands of competence and feelings of self-worth and dignity. Nurturing resilience is an immeasurable, lifelong gift parents can offer their children. It is part of a parent's legacy to the next generation.

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