

December 18, 2005 • The Cincinnati Enquirer

STRONGER than their struggles

By Krista Ramsey

TODAY'S CHILD: RESILIENT KIDS

This is the fifth in our series 'Today's Child,' spotlighting important, but often overlooked, children's issues. Find our previous topic, 'Overscheduled Kids,' on Cincinnati.com. Keyword todayschild.

Resilient, adj.

1) Able to recover from or adjust to misfortune or change

Jana Clear's life changed instantly, and permanently, when at age 3 she was diagnosed with leukemia.

In the short-term, the disease dominated her life and threatened her future, relegating her to 18 months of grueling chemotherapy, robbing her of energy and hair, and triggering years of uncertainty about her health.

But the long-term story played out far differently. With the support of her family and growing inner skills to deal with it, Jana slowly turned the tables on her disease. She laughed rather than cried at her first glimpse of her chemo-induced bald head, told family members that while her brothers had allergies, she "just had leukemia," and years later, turned her gratitude for restored health into a fund-raising crusade for Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center.

"I use it as a blessing even now, although I could be bitter about it," the 17-year-old Baden High School senior says. "I choose to see it as a blessing and not a burden."

Mental health experts call young people like Jana "resilient" - not superkids able to blithely float above their struggles, but very human strugglers who painfully make their way through problems and arrive, scarred but stronger and more self-aware, on the other side.

Two decades of research on resilient children have triggered a revolutionary shift in how kids facing adversity are viewed in mental health circles and schools.

Viewed in terms of their strengths rather than their weaknesses, struggling children were found to develop great inner resources - what experts call a "self-righting" tendency - that helped them learn to adjust and adapt to the changed circumstances of their life. And when surrounded by the right supports - known clinically as "protective factors" - they could not only survive daunting odds, but go on to productive lives, often made more meaningful by their struggle.

These are not kids who pluckily “bounced back.” “When it comes to something like a death in your family, you don’t get over it, you don’t bounce back,” said Vicky Ott, program coordinator at Fernside Center for Grieving Children. “What you do is incorporate this experience into your life story, and you become a different person.”

What helps struggling kids most, said Tom Lottman, deputy executive director of Children Inc., is viewing them from “a framework that looks at these children and sees hope.”

That deficits-to-strengths shift in emphasis is now being applied to everything from flailing companies to overwhelmed adults and, in a growing number of schools, is revolutionizing the classroom.

“I emphasize that the strategies that we’ve learned to help those children faced with great adversity, can help all children,” said Harvard Medical School clinical psychologist Robert Brooks, author of “Raising Resilient Children.” “One never knows, even for children who grow up in loving homes, what adversity they’ll face that we’d never expect - their parents divorcing, a death in the family - the kinds of things that will throw their equilibrium off.”

“Americans need look no further than the destruction of the World Trade Center,” Brooks said. “At 8 a.m., thousands of children whose parents were employed there were viewed as fine and, by 10:30 a.m., were viewed as ‘at risk,’” he said.

But the point isn’t to apply resilience training to extreme or necessarily even tragic circumstances. The real goal is to give all children more tools in their emotional toolbox - more options for dealing with any difficulty, more skills to analyze problems and better communication tools to share their feelings and seek help. Those skills can’t prevent disaster or disappointment, but they can make children better able to cope with whatever comes their way.

“We shouldn’t try to raise resilient children because there might be another Sept. 11,” Brooks said. “We should raise resilient children because they will enjoy life more, become better problem solvers, and have those skills that will help them live a successful and productive life.”

Most experts agree on several key skills that help children survive and adapt.

Chief among them: a strong connection to people who care about them. “What really fosters resilience - if I had to choose one word - is community,” said Bonnie Benard, a resiliency expert and senior program associate at WestEd, a California-based nonprofit education and development research agency. “The critical protective factor is family, school, community. It’s always based in caring relationships.”

In fact, research shows that even a single close relationship with an adult - a parent, grandparent, teacher, coach - can help a child survive trauma. Researchers call it “the

power of one,” and University of Chicago clinical psychologist Froma Walsh, one of the nation’s top resilience researchers, said, “We can, through our relationships with children, help bring out their courage and confidence.”

The most important work that goes on in such relationships is helping children feel empowered - able to think through options, weigh consequences, alter plans, identify their strengths and take action.

An example: To stimulate resilience and recovery, children who have organ transplants at Cincinnati Children’s Hospital Medical Center are encouraged to take part in as many health-care decisions as possible - what time their appointments are scheduled, which nurse they’ll work with, how their room will be arranged.

“The payoff is that the more they’re involved in medical decision-making, the more likely they’ll have medical adherence - taking their medicine, coming to appointments and feeling comfortable asking questions and understanding more about their disease,” said Dr. Kelly McGraw, clinical psychologist and assistant professor of pediatrics at Children’s. “All of that makes them feel more in control, that they play a part in their own care.”

Indeed, one of the hard-won advantages kids have after struggling through adversity is that they know their inner strengths and can apply tested skills to other difficulties. Trauma and tragedy may initially bring insecurity but, over time, they often bring a somber self-confidence.

Christopher Gindele, a 16-year-old from Blue Ash, was diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes at age 5 and has lived with the daily realities of the disease ever since - at least five checks of his blood-sugar count, six shots of insulin, close monitoring of his diet and constant toting of an emergency supply kit.

This summer when a new difficulty hit - the basketball player broke his hand, acquired a plate and four metal screws in its repair and had to alter his shooting style radically - Christopher took a philosophical approach.

“My basketball season was in jeopardy, but I thought to myself, ‘If I can deal with this disease for 10 years, I can come back and play,’” he said.

This season he is starting forward on the Sycamore High School junior varsity team.

“I get all the time that I’m more mature than other people my age, and I hold diabetes responsible for that because I had to deal with more challenges than most kids at 8 or 9, who were just being a normal kid,” he said.

That matter-of-fact approach to adversity - the simple acknowledgement that difficulty is part of life - may be children’s best protective factor, said New York educational psychologist Sybil Wolin, director of Project Resilience.

“Suffering has been with us forever. Every religion I know has asked the question, ‘How do people live in the face of it?’“ she said. “We’ve seen, throughout history, that most people stand themselves up. They don’t collapse. Children - and all of us - are wired with the capacity to cope, to rise above, to manage our difficulties.”

Coupling that belief in children’s hardiness with sympathetic and constant support will go a long way to helping children rise above adversity - and helping adults to see struggling students, patients and offspring from the perspective of a “framework of hope.”

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KEYS TO RESILIENCE

In the mid-1980s, City University of New York psychologist and stress researchers found resilient or “hardy” individuals share three key characteristics:

- The belief they can control or influence events.
- The ability to feel deeply committed to their activities.
- A view of change as an exciting challenge.

The ‘superkids’ myth

It’s probably only natural, in a society where children are increasingly expected to be good at everything, that they’d be expected to recover from loss and tragedy effortlessly as well.

That’s what resilience experts say is sometimes expected of children who experience the death of a parent, a life-threatening disease, or a family disaster.

Most adults are frankly uncomfortable dealing with a grieving or physically suffering child so they sometimes either deny the child’s pain or obsess over premature signs of “recovery.”

“Our society emphasizes, ‘Bounce right back. Go back to school or work after a tragedy,’ but people who have been interviewed after experiencing a crisis don’t describe it that way,” said resiliency expert Froma Walsh, a University of Chicago clinical psychologist. “They say, ‘We suffered. We didn’t think we could get up another day, but we tapped into something deep inside ourselves and found resources we didn’t know we had.’“

Children faced with adversity suffer extra when adults treat them in stereotypical ways - either viewing them as victims to be pitied or as what researchers call “superkids,” who appear to face tragedy with almost inhuman stoicism and optimism.

“The kid who overcame a difficulty is seen as a splendid specimen because he overcame the trouble with courage and fortitude, and that tears at everyone’s heart strings,” said educational psychologist Sybil Wolin, director of Project Resilience in New York. “But there’s little attention paid to the child who’s in the midst of struggling with it.”

Having to maintain a façade of strength they don’t possess or cheerfulness they don’t feel often lengthens the healing process for the child, and puts him at odds with his own genuine feelings.

“The idea of someone being a superkid is unrealistic,” said Elizabeth Hater, whose sister Danielle died of cancer three years ago. “If the person isn’t thinking about what’s happened to them or isn’t affected by it, then it really means they’re not dealing with it at all.”

For Elizabeth, 17, healing has come slowly but genuinely, helped along by close family relationships, rituals that keep memories of Danielle strong - like preparing a meal at Ronald McDonald House on her birthday and decorating a Christmas tree near her grave - and writing about her loss.

Elizabeth also volunteers at Fernside Center for Grieving Children in Blue Ash, where she attended programs after Danielle’s death. In one activity there, children break apart a clay flowerpot, then write memories of their deceased family member on the pieces and glue the pot back together.

“We tell them, ‘We can put this pot together but it’s not the same pot, and we can put our lives back together but we’re not the same people,’” said program coordinator Vicky Ott. “We help children build resilience - but there’s nothing easy about it. It takes hard work.”

WHAT DEFINES RESILIENCE?

In their Washington, D.C.-based training and research program, Project Resilience, Dr. Sybil Wolin and Dr. Steven Wolin stress seven “resiliencies” or strengths that help children through hardship:

– INSIGHT

Asking tough questions and giving honest answers

– INITIATIVE

Taking charge of problems

– RELATIONSHIPS

Making fulfilling connections to other people

– CREATIVITY

Using imagination and self-expression in art forms

– INDEPENDENCE

Distancing emotionally and physically from the sources of trouble in one's life

– HUMOR

Finding the comic in the tragic

– MORALITY

Acting on the basis of an informed conscience

MAKING YOUR KIDS MORE RESILIENT

The first thing researchers want parents to know is that resilience is nurtured in children, not born in them.

The second is that you don't have to wait until your child encounters trouble or tragedy to begin building the emotional strengths that will help him handle good times as well as bad.

Here's advice on helping your kids be more resilient:

– Help children make meaning of their difficulty - understanding why their parents divorced, for example, or what factors led to their mom being downsized out of a job. The more they understand the dynamics behind a difficulty, the less likely they are to blame themselves for it or spend the rest of their lives trying to compensate.

– Let your child speak frankly about his feelings - even if they're anger, remorse or other emotions that make you uncomfortable. "Just the ability to talk about something can give you power over it," said Vicky Ott, program coordinator at Fernside Center for Grieving Children. "And finding out other people feel the same way is even more empowering."

– From their toddler years on, train kids to be good problem solvers. "Take a problem and break it down and see what they can do, what actions they can take," said Ott, of Fernside Center for Grieving Children. "Even in the worst of situations, options make children feel empowered."

– Let children mourn the people, abilities or opportunities they've lost. Children are often hurried through grief. Instead, adults should help them find ways to express it, talk openly about how their lives or plans have changed, and then move on to activities and interests that will help rebuild their daily lives.

– Don't label children by their struggles. "We shrink kids when we give them labels," said resilience expert Bonnie Benard, resiliency expert and senior program associate at

WestEd, a nonprofit education and development research agency. “There’s a strong message in the words we use - a victim of Katrina, a victim of child abuse. As soon as kids hear that, they think, ‘We’re not actors, we’re acted upon.’ We need to reframe that - ‘You are resilient, and you can mend stronger at the break.’”

As much as possible, get back to “normalcy.” Kids who have had to move between homes after a divorce, or spend lengthy stays in hospitals because of illness, crave familiar, everyday life. “Being able to have a regular routine brings back their resilience,” said Wanda Meriwether, pediatric oncology social worker at Cincinnati Children’s Hospital Medical Center.

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