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Parental Resilience

Parents who can take it in stride when everyday life is stressful and can cope with the occasional crisis are said to be resilient. Everyone has had a hard day or days in a row when it just seemed that nothing was going right.

The car breaks down on the way to work.

A family member is very ill.

The school calls and says your child is acting badly toward others.

The water heater is leaking. Etc., etc., etc.,

All parents have inner strengths or other resources that serve as a foundation of resiliency when times are hard. Most parents can make it through those times of stress, but everyone needs help from time to time. When parents take care in these stressful times, their children learn a model of coping behavior.

There are families that have a history of abuse or neglect, physical or mental health problems and other stresses such as financial trouble, unemployment and even homelessness. These are times when parents need to seek help through friendships with others, their children's teachers and community resources.

Using the word "courage" instead of resilience during stressful times or a crisis helps parents see a way to survive and regain their ability to keep on going. Below are a few questions that parents can use with each other to talk about how to be resilient.

What are your dreams for yourself and your family?

What helps you cope with everyday life?

What kinds of frustrations do you deal with during the day?

How are you able to meet your children's needs when you are dealing with stress?

What are your goals for your family or children in the next week or month?

The first step in dealing with stress or crisis is to identify what is worrying a parent the most. Parents can empower each other to seek help and take action to fight stress and build both resilience and hope. Below are a few ideas to share with others.

Get regular exercise, listen to your favorite music, meditate or pray.

Plan ahead if possible so that resources will be in place when needed—such as temporary child care. Build a small savings to take care of minor repairs.

Use family, friends, faith-based communities and other community agencies such as the YMCA to increase strength.

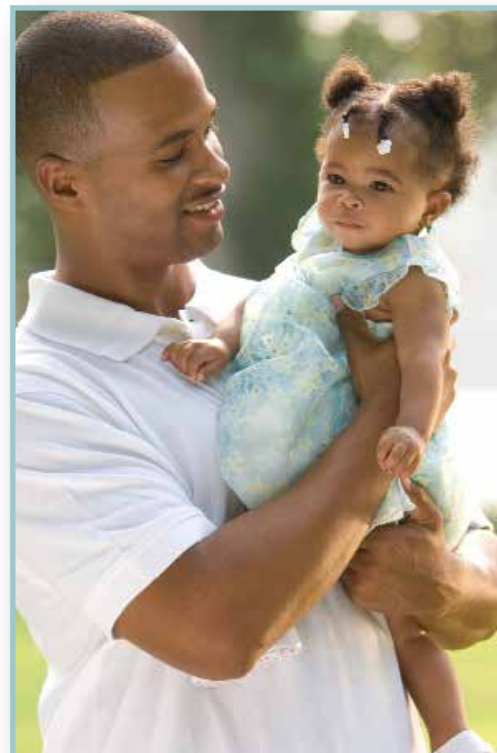
Look for programs that offer family-to-family help and find a mentor willing to listen.

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Social Connections

Most parents need people they can call on once in a while when they need someone to listen, give some advice, or just when feeling a little “down.” Often family helps out, but everyone needs a friend or group to do fun things with, swap stories about their children or just have a cup of coffee with occasionally.

Finding out about and building on parents’ current or possible social connections, interests and abilities is a great way to partner with parents. Sometimes parents have a hard time finding and keeping social connections for a variety of reasons. Encouraging one another to talk about goals for social connections is a start. Ask some basic questions.

Who can you call for advice or just to talk?

How often do you see them?

Do you have family members or friends nearby who can help you out once in a while?

Do you belong to a church, temple, mosque, women’s group or men’s group?

Do you have a child in a local pre-school, school or Head Start program?

Talking with parents about their strengths and challenges is making social connections through culture and language, establishing a comfort level in groups of people. Being a new person in the neighborhood is a good way to show parents how to make those critical social connections. Maybe you have the means to provide transportation to church, community centers or other resources.

Talk about the benefits of getting out with others for fun or joining a group to learn a new skill.

Think about what you can provide to parents to help them get out for an evening.

Lunchtime meetings may be possible for some parents who work.

Suggest “mommy” blogs or other Internet sites that encourage social connections.

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Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development

Who knows a child best—their likes and dislikes, the things that interest them and the things they can do really well? Parents do! But no parent is an expert in everything about their child's development and the best ways to help their children manage social and emotional behaviors.

Research links healthy child development to effective parenting. When parents provide safe boundaries, affection, good listening skills and consistent rules and expectations, children thrive. Successful parenting helps children succeed in school, feel loved, get along with others and have a sense of belonging. Parenting skills must change as children grow and mature. Parents must also be able to adjust to each child's individual needs and unique circumstances.

Knowledge of parenting and child development changes over time. For example, laying children to sleep on their stomachs is now known to contribute to SIDS (Sudden Infant Death Syndrome) when it was standard practice a number of years ago. Parents need the latest information on health and safety practices, what is taking place in a child's social world, learning expectations in school and many other aspects of a child's life. All parents have questions about raising their children and they need answers and support from someone they trust. Another way to think about this is, "Parenting is part natural and part learned."

To help parents feel comfortable about the questions they have raising their children, here are some conversation starters. Remember, parents need to focus on their own hopes as well as goals for their children. They need help in identifying and building on their strengths in parenting and acknowledgement of their parenting efforts and the frustrations of parenting.

Talk about what your child does best and what you like about your child.
Tell me what you like about being the parent of an infant, preschooler, etc.
What are some of the things that you find hard about being a parent?
What works best for your child when he/she is sad, angry or frustrated?
How have you seen other parents handle the same kinds of behaviors?
Tell me about the things that worry you about your child.
How do you encourage your child to explore his/her surroundings, try new things and do things on his/her own?

There are no cookie-cutter families. All families have a set of values, cultural norms and beliefs that need to be respected and acknowledged. Parents can help one another find many resources to answer questions about child development and many tips to reduce stress in the child's life. Striking a balance between reducing a child's stress while protecting the child from harm will promote their coping skills and resilience.

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Concrete Supports in Times of Need

Families have basic needs such as housing, food, clothing, etc. They may also need help with childcare, physical and mental health. Most parents are unlikely to use words like “concrete supports.” Instead they may think of a goal being, “My family can access services when they need them.”

Parents may not always know about community resources that can help meet their basic needs or how to find essential services. Sometimes language or cultural differences make it difficult for parents to know where to turn for the help they need. Parents welcome information from other parents about services they used in times of stress or in crisis. It may be contact information or even helping another parent make the first calls and appointments depending on what individual parents say they need.

Parents may not be aware of services that could help. You can let them know about all available resources, so they may select what is best for their needs.

Parents are more likely to use culturally appropriate services. If you can link them with services where their language is spoken or their culture is observed, parents may feel more comfortable and get a greater benefit.

Parents who have a lot of needs may get overwhelmed with all the different paperwork and requirements that agencies use. Parents who know about these requirements can help talk others through the process so that parents will feel more comfortable using the resource.

Working with parents to identify their most critical basic needs and local concrete supports keeps the focus on family-driven solutions.

Here are some ideas about how to partner with parents to find the best resources to support parent needs.

Identify from the parents' perspective their most immediate need, such as staying in their house, keeping a job or paying the heating bill.

Look at steps the parents have taken to deal with the problem and assess how it is or is not working.

Talk about current connections such as community or other local resources, faith-based communities, pre-school or school relationships and pediatricians to name a few.

Explore the parents' ability to find ways to access services such as transportation, encouragement, phone calls and other personal help.

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Social and Emotional Competence of Children

Research shows that just as children's brains and bodies develop so do their emotions and their ability to express themselves.

Parents may choose to communicate the importance of social and emotional competence in terms of the desired outcomes: "My children feel loved, believe they matter and can get along with others." Below are some ways to talk with parents about this important part of their children's lives.

- When you spend time with your child what do you like to do together?
- What does your child do when he/she is sad, angry or tired?
- What are your child's greatest gifts and talents?
- How do you encourage these talents?
- What do you do when your child does something great?
- What routines do you keep in caring for your young child?

Parenting is a two-way street. As children grow and develop the ability to interact with the family and others in a positive manner, it is easier for parents to respond in the same way. When a child has problems or needs due to age, disability or other factors, then the parent may need additional support. Parents can share resources to promote healthy social and emotional development with one another. Here are some websites that provide practical tips for managing behaviors as well as fun activities for families. These websites also include chat sessions.

Center on the Social & Emotional Foundations for Early Learning, <http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu> provides a lot of good materials and has a special site for parents. The site also has links to a lot of free materials helpful to parents including Spanish versions.

The website <http://www.challengingbehavior.org> has an email sign-up for a newsletter for parents interested in getting practical tips on managing behaviors and routines.

The website <http://www.parentsknowkidsgrow.org> is sponsored by the Department of Human Services and is designed to be a resource for parents looking for information on raising their children. This site also has an email sign-up for a newsletter and many links to resources.

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Nurturing and Attachment

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Juggling the demands of work, home, and other responsibilities leaves many parents feeling like they do not have nearly enough time with their children. But even small acts of kindness, protection, and caring—a hug, a smile, or loving words—make a big difference to children. Research shows that babies who receive affection and nurturing from their parents have the best chance of developing into children, teens, and adults who are happy, healthy, and competent.

Research also shows that a consistent relationship with a caring adult in the early years is associated with better grades, healthier behaviors, more positive peer interactions, and an increased ability to cope with stress later in life. Infant brains develop best when a few stable caregivers work to understand and meet the infant's need for love, affection, and stimulation. Conversely, neglectful and abusive parenting can have a negative effect on brain development. A lack of contact or interaction with a caregiver can change the infant's body chemistry, resulting in a reduction in the growth hormones essential for brain and heart development. Furthermore, children who lack early emotional attachments will have a difficult time relating to peers.

As children grow, nurturing by parents and other caregivers remains important for healthy physical and emotional development. Parents nurture their older children by making time to listen to them, being involved and interested in the child's school and other activities, staying aware of the child or teen's interests and friends, and being willing to advocate for the child when necessary.

Parenting strategies that promote nurturing:

Using infant care and strategies that promote bonding and attachment (e.g., breastfeeding, rocking, using a baby carrier, responding to crying, talking lovingly, consistency within and across caregivers, and stability of primary caregivers).

Understanding cultural differences in how parents and children show affection.

Having appropriate knowledge and expectations of what to do when your child has an emotional or behavioral disability that limits his or her ability to respond to parental nurturing.

Using affection-based parenting styles and discipline instead of coercive-based discipline

How Programs Can Help

Use parent education strategies (workshops, lending libraries) as opportunities to share information about how a strong parent-child bond enhances brain development and supports positive behavior in young children.

Share resources available from your agency and throughout the community on how parents can nurture and connect with their children at every age.

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Nurturing and Attachment

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Engage and include all important adults in a child's life, including fathers, grandparents, and extended family, as part of a child's "nurturing network." Acknowledge cultural differences in how parents and children show affection. Recognize that when a child does not show a positive response to the parent (due to an emotional, developmental, or behavioral disability, for example), the parent may need additional support.

How Other Parents and Adults Can Help

Even a few minutes of quality time in the car, at the store, or while cooking dinner mean so much to a child. Other caring adults can model nurturing behaviors and point out instances of positive interaction between parent and child to reinforce behavior. Some parents have chosen to communicate the importance of nurturing and attachment simply as: "Our family shows how much we love each other."



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Questions to Help Parents Identify Their Protective Factors:

Resources to Overcome Hard Times and Rebound

What do I dream for me and my family? _____

What gives me hope or strength during hard times? _____

What can I do to help me cope with everyday life? _____

Is there another parent I can encourage? _____

My Social Community

Friends who support me: _____

Friends who have children and can support my parenting:

Who can I talk to when I am having a bad day? _____

How do my friends support me? _____

How do I support my friends? _____

Places in the community where I feel connected:

Groups I belong to: _____

Gifts I bring to a group: _____

My Family's Health and Well-Being

Skills and resources I could use (e.g. transportation): _____

Skills and resources I could share (e.g. household repairs): _____

Community resources that I know about: _____

What I know well enough to teach: _____

Ways my family can handle problems: _____

My Child Feels Loved

How do I express my feelings to my child? _____

How do I show my child I am listening to their questions? _____

How does my family express love? _____

What does my family do for fun? _____

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