

# How To Raise Resilient Kids

One of the greatest lessons a parent can impart to their kids is the ability to succeed on their own, even amid setbacks.

5 min read

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Here's a confession: I'm an overprotective mother. In my defense, it's not entirely my fault. I come from a long line of worrywarts who always have the "worst-case scenario" part of their brains turned on. As a result, the women in my family (and occasionally, a few of the men) do anything and everything to make sure our children never get hurt—physically and emotionally.

It turns out, according to Daniel Hoffman, PhD, director of behavioral health, Northwell Health Physician Partners, that following in my family's overprotective footsteps could actually rob my children of one of the most important lessons in life: how to be resilient.

According to Hoffman, we're all born with the capacity for resiliency, but children need help to fully develop those skills. "Getting over certain things isn't possible unless we learn what to do during these trying times," he explains. "They need support as they build

skills that teach them to be resilient. Once they have those skills, they can go through some really hard times and bounce back from them.”

Hoffman points to a groundbreaking series of [studies](#) conducted in Hawaii that were the first to show that kids need support to become resilient. The researchers followed nearly 700 children from the time they were born in 1955 until they turned 40. What they found was that despite the hardships many of them faced growing up, about one-third of the children with one or more risk factors (severe poverty, family instability, health issues, abusive homes, etc.) grew up to be caring, competent, and confident adults. The key is that they all had one adult—such as a parent, grandparent, teacher, coach—whom they could lean on for support and who modeled resiliency during their formative years.

So how can we make sure our children grow up to be resilient adults who can overcome setbacks, disappointments, and even traumatic events? Hoffman shared five tips to keep in mind.

## **Let them fail**

One of the most important gifts we can give to our kids is to let them experience failure, says Hoffman. “The culture where everyone gets a participation trophy is counterproductive and infantilizing,” he adds.

Hoffman believes that participating in a sport—or any activity that involves teamwork and competition—is the perfect opportunity for lessons in resilience because it teaches them that they won't always win in life. “Children learn how to rely on their teammates and work with them, and they also figure out how to recover from losses, individually and together,” he explains.

This doesn't mean we should be heartless or unsupportive. But it's important to allow our children to feel their negative emotions and normalize failure as a method of learning. Don't minimize their being upset over a loss, a poor grade, or a setback—all emotions are valid.

## **Give them space**

Hoffman points out that today's parents are overly involved with their children at times. While it's great to be an active part of your child's life, many of us are jumping in before we're actually needed. “Hovering around our kids so we can rescue them does not help them,” he says.

For example, if your elementary or middle school child has a friend over and there is a conflict between them, don't be so quick to solve the problem. Watch to see if they can work it out. The same goes for older kids. If your teen is struggling in a class, instead of immediately firing off an email to the teacher, collaboratively brainstorm with your child about many possible solutions to their problems. Then encourage your child to approach the teacher first to figure out what they can do to improve their grade.

If your child has tried to handle things on their own and is still struggling, then of course you can step in to help. But not giving them the chance to problem-solve on their own does more harm than good.

## **Don't be so accommodating**

Whether it's academics or extracurriculars, things don't always come easy. For some kids, it's easier to just give up, and for parents, it's tempting to give in. "We often let our kids slide so they don't have to do the hard stuff," explains Hoffman. "We don't want them to struggle or have anxiety, so we let them skip anything that is challenging or too hard."

But encouraging our children to keep going, even when the going gets tough, is a key component of building resilience. Failure is a part of life, and learning how to recover from it goes a long way—especially as they get older and the challenges get bigger. Helping kids learn how to calm down when they're anxious, sad, or angry, as opposed to removing triggers, is an important skill set. Helping them apply themselves without removing the obstacles is a growth opportunity.

## **Ask, don't tell**

It's so easy for parents to simply tell their child what they should do when they run into a problem. After all, we're adults and have been through most of what they're dealing with already. Shouldn't we share our knowledge with them? Not right away, says Hoffman.

“Kids need to learn to advocate for themselves, so instead of telling them what to do, ask them what *they* think they should do,” he explains. “Give them the chance to come up with a few solutions on their own. You can always let them know what has worked for you later.”

## **Be a resiliency role model**

We never stop going through challenging times—don’t hide your own from your children. Instead, Hoffman suggests letting them see you navigate your own obstacles, whether it’s having an argument with your best friend or losing out on a work promotion. Talk to them about what you’re going through in an age-appropriate way, and let them see firsthand how you’re coping with those setbacks or conflicts. Remember, a parent is their child’s best teacher.