

Guide 2

Critical abilities associated with resilience



What are some critical abilities associated with resilience? How can adults and children develop them?

According to researchers at the University of Pennsylvania, thinking processes directly affect several critical abilities linked with resilience.³ Developing and maintaining these resiliency abilities is an ongoing process that helps adults and young children bounce back from daily stress and tough times.

Ability 1. Emotional Regulation

Emotional regulation is being in charge of our emotions enough to stay calm under pressure. When we get upset or angry, our emotions can be overwhelming and can adversely affect our whole day. When we're in charge of our emotions, we're able to calm down and clear our heads enough so that we don't stay overwhelmed.

Being in charge of our emotions doesn't mean that we cut off our emotions or keep them inside. Expressing emotions is healthy and constructive. Being in charge of our emotions is a key part of self-regulation. It is necessary to calm down enough so that we can express our emotions in ways that will help, rather than hurt, a situation.

We can see the beginning stages of self-regulation in babies when they suck their fingers or hold onto their blankets to soothe themselves. Young children need our support to calm down. We can do this by letting them know that all feelings are acceptable, but not all behaviours are. We need to set firm and loving limits on their behaviour. For example, we can say, "*It's okay to be mad. It's not okay to hurt yourself or somebody else.*" Then we can give them other choices to help them express their emotions safely and to calm down. For example, they can draw their "mad" feelings on paper.

One simple and effective way to be in charge of our emotions is the old tried and true method of taking *three deep breaths*. When we slowly inhale to the count of three and exhale to the count of three a few times in a

row, we experience an amazing calming effect. Young children can learn to do "belly breaths" to calm down. Ask them to feel their bellies swell with air as they slowly inhale, and then, feel their bellies deflate as they slowly exhale. Tell them it's just like blowing up and releasing the air from a balloon.

Dr. Andrew Shatté, resiliency researcher and co-author of *The Resilience Factor*, says that emotional regulation is the most important ability associated with resilience.³ Being in charge of our emotions affects the way we interact with others, the way we solve problems—even the way we look at the world.



Ability 2. Impulse Control

Impulse control is the ability to stop and choose whether to act on the desire to do something. For example, when we see an item we want even though we cannot afford it, impulse control enables us to stop and decide that going into debt in order to have that item may cause unnecessary financial stress.

Controlling our impulses helps enhance executive functioning skills²⁰ such as planning for the future, finishing what we set out to do, focusing our attention and delaying gratification.

The "Marshmallow Experiment," an interesting study about delaying gratification, was done in the 1970s by researchers at a preschool on the Stanford University campus. The researchers invited four-year-olds into a room and told them, "*You can have this marshmallow right now, but if you wait until I come back from running an errand, you can have two marshmallows.*" When a follow-up study was done fourteen years later, the



researchers found that the four-year-olds who were able to wait for the second marshmallow were better able to cope with the frustration. They were also doing better academically and socially in their teen years.²¹

We can help young children develop impulse control by modelling it ourselves and giving them opportunities to practice waiting. Then we can acknowledge their effort. For example, we can say, “*You did it! It was really hard to wait, but you did it!*”

Impulse control and emotional regulation are important self-regulation skills that lay the groundwork for developing the other resiliency abilities.

Ability 3. Causal Analysis

Causal analysis is the ability to analyze and accurately decide what caused the problem we are facing. The word *accurate* is very important. Researchers at the University of Pennsylvania have shown that what we *think* about stressful events or problems affects how we *feel* about these events and what we do about them.

Most people have developed thinking habits that become set patterns known as “thinking styles” or “explanatory styles.” Some thinking habits get in the way of people’s ability to look at problems accurately, find solutions and bounce back.

If we use our thinking styles to analyze a problem, we may not be accurate about what caused the problem. Resilient thinking allows us to be flexible—to step back and assess the problem specifically and to decide what is accurate in a particular situation. For example, “*It’s all my fault!*” is revised to “*I’m only one member of the team.*” “*This is never going to end!*” becomes “*Once exams are over, I’ll be able to hang out with my friends.*” “*I can’t do anything right!*” is replaced with “*I’ll get better at this once I have more experience.*” (We’ll talk more about thinking habits or styles in Guide 4; see page 12.)

Assessing situations accurately and flexibly can help us determine how long the adversity will last and how much

of our lives it will affect. Realizing that a challenging situation is temporary and affects only a specific part of our lives helps us feel less overwhelmed. When a challenging situation is actually permanent and affects many aspects of our lives, accurate and flexible thinking can help us put solutions into place to ease the stress.

We can help children develop the ability to analyze problems by first helping them identify the problem and then discussing together what they can do about it. For example, we can say, “*There is a problem here because you both want to play with the same toy. What do you think you could do?*” or “*What do you think we could do to solve the problem?*”

To help children think more accurately and flexibly about whether a situation is permanent or temporary, we can challenge their initial assessment of the situation. For example:

- “*I never get to be first in line*” or “*She always gets to play with Alicia*” can be challenged by first acknowledging the child’s feeling and then offering a gentle reminder like, “*Remember, yesterday you and Alicia played together in the kitchen centre?*” or “*We all get a chance to be first in line. Your turn will come, too.*”
- “*I will never be able to do ...*” can be challenged by reminding the child of past achievements: “*You seem frustrated right now. Remember, you thought you would never be able to put on your jacket without my help? Now you can do it all by yourself!*”





Ability 4. Realistic Optimism

Realistic optimism is the ability to maintain hope for a bright future. This kind of optimism is not about seeing only the positive things in life and dismissing negative events. It's about seeing things as they are and believing that we can make the best out of a situation: "Realistic optimism is the ability to maintain a positive outlook without denying reality, actively appreciating the positive aspects of a situation without ignoring the negative aspects."³ It is the ability to work toward positive outcomes with the knowledge that they don't happen automatically, but are achieved through communication, effort, problem solving, and planning. We do this by generating alternatives to encountered obstacles. We can ask ourselves, "What else can happen now?" or "How else could I think about this?" Here's an example:

When a plan to take the children to the park for a picnic seemed threatened by an overnight rainfall and continuing grey skies, Martha considered the big picture. The children were looking forward to the outing, and overcast skies and cooler temperatures could mean fewer crowds from nearby childcare centres. The wet grass wouldn't be a problem if the kids wore their rainboots and coats. And if it started to rain, they could picnic on the benches under the shelter, and finish their outing by going to a nearby library.

Martha was able to view the situation with realistic optimism. She didn't deny the negative aspects of the weather, but she also found some positive features—less heat and fewer crowds. She put a plan into place and believed she could cope with whatever the weather might bring. And by talking about the plan with the children before the outing, Martha modelled how accurate and flexible thinking can help people look for the controllable aspects in everyday situations.

Ability 5. Empathy

Empathy is often described as understanding what it is like to walk in another person's shoes. It's the ability to understand the feelings and needs of another person.

Children learn to understand and support others' feelings by being understood and supported by those around them. Young children benefit when an adult helps them recognize their own feelings: "You look happy about doing that all by yourself." Later on, adults can help children recognize others' feelings: "Jenny's face looks sad. I wonder if she misses playing with her friend today." Research tells us that being understood and understanding others are important to building the capacity for resilience.

Ability 6. Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy is the feeling of being effective in the world—that we can make a difference and have an impact. It is the belief that we have the competence to tackle problems and bounce back when things get tough. This attitude influences our ability to persevere and maintain a realistically optimistic view of the future.

Self-efficacy is rooted in actual experience. We can help children experience competence by giving them choices that allow them to influence decisions that affect them, for example: "It's cold outside. Do you want to wear your hat or pull up your hood?" Offering choice helps children feel that they have some control over what they do. Giving them opportunities to succeed, but still feel challenged, increases confidence.





Ability 7. Reaching Out

Reaching out is the ability to take on new opportunities that life presents. Resiliency research suggests that people who see mistakes as learning opportunities find it easier to take risks and try new things.

We can help children want to try new things by pointing out, “*No one is perfect*” and “*Everyone makes mistakes. It is part of how we learn.*” Adults can also model making mistakes and fixing them: “*Remember when I forgot to read the story yesterday? Today, I’m going to read two stories.*”

We can also remind children of what they have already accomplished, so that they see that they are indeed growing and learning every day: “*When you were a baby, you couldn’t walk. And look at you now! You run so fast, I can hardly keep up with you.*”

Another important part of reaching out is being accurate and realistic about how much we can cope with and being willing to ask for help when we need it. We can find support from friends, co-workers, community organizations, and professionals. We can help children reach out for support by modelling that it is okay to ask for help. We all need support from others sometimes.²

RESILIENCY ABILITIES:

Reflections to Myself

- Which ability(ies) is a strength for me?
- Which ability(ies) is challenging for me?
- What can I do to develop an ability(ies) that is challenging for me?

Reflections About the Children

Think about one child you work with:

- Which ability(ies) is his/her emerging strength?
- Which ability(ies) is challenging for this child?
- What can I do to help this child develop a challenging area(s)?

Please visit www.reachinginreachingout.com, RIRO’s website, for a brief video on strategies to develop emotional regulation: *Calming and Focusing* (Skills Video 7).

For a link to children’s storybooks that promote the resiliency abilities, go to: <http://www.reachinginreachingout.com/resources-booksKids.htm>.

Summary of Guide 2

Critical abilities associated with resilience



What are some critical abilities associated with resilience?

According to researchers at the University of Pennsylvania, thinking processes directly affect several critical abilities associated with resilience, including:

- **Emotional regulation:** the ability to keep calm under pressure and express emotions in a way that helps the situation
- **Impulse control:** the ability to stop and choose whether to act on the desire to take action; the ability to delay gratification and follow through on goals and plans
- **Causal analysis:** the ability to analyze problems and accurately decide what the causes are
- **Empathy:** the ability to understand the feelings and needs of another person
- **Realistic optimism:** the ability to keep a positive outlook without denying reality
- **Self-efficacy:** the belief that one has the ability to solve problems, handle stress and persevere
- **Reaching out:** the ability to take new opportunities and reach out to others

Resilience is not something we either have or don't have. Developing and maintaining resiliency abilities is an *ongoing process*.

What can adults do to help children develop these key resiliency abilities?

- Teach children strategies to calm themselves down, control impulses, and delay gratification.
- Help children plan for positive outcomes by analyzing the cause of the current problem.
- Guide children as they try to identify their own and others' feelings, understand cause and effect, and reach out to ask for support from others when they need it.
- Promote development of children's self-worth and encourage them to express an interest in life, take opportunities that are presented, and actively engage with others.