

Guide 8

The importance of relationships and role modelling



Section 1 focused on several evidence-based resiliency thinking skills that help adults handle stress and adversity, gain perspective in times of trouble, and deal with problems, conflict, and opportunity. In this Guide, we will focus on developing young children's resilience through relationships with warm, responsive adults who consistently model and teach resiliency skills.

How do our relationships with children affect their resilience?

As we discussed in Guides 1 and 2, very young children can develop critical resiliency abilities by watching adults around them model resilient thinking and behaviour in response to stressful situations. We also mentioned that the quality of our relationships with young children is critical to their development of resilience. In fact, researchers have found that relationship experiences affect children's early brain development, social perceptions, as well as their abilities to self-regulate and develop a capacity for interpersonal communication.^{23, 24}

Relationships are a protective factor

Studies also show that relationships can be an important protective factor in helping children who have been exposed to harsh conditions, including poverty, neglect, and abuse.^{1, 12} Children who successfully negotiate the transition from such conditions to healthy adulthood consistently cite the importance of their relationship to *one* adult in either a family or community environment. That adult encouraged them to believe in themselves and their capacity to steer through life's challenges.³¹

A person's capacity to steer through challenges is highly related to their *self-efficacy*, or their belief in their ability to influence their environment.^{3, 11, 17}

How can we support children's self-efficacy?

Social psychologist Dr. Martin Seligman states that a sense of self-efficacy precedes the development of genuine self-esteem. He suggests that caregivers can foster self-efficacy, self-esteem, and resilience in young children by providing them with opportunities to:

- 1) experience true **mastery**
- 2) gain a perspective of "**positivity**"
- 3) **observe adults modelling** resilient thinking styles⁵

Let's look more closely at each of Seligman's suggestions.

Experiencing mastery

Mastery involves a child's behaviour—what a child *does* to control certain outcomes. True mastery is experienced when there is a direct relationship between the child's action and the outcome. For example, an infant causes a rattle to make a sound when he shakes it. Experiences that promote mastery can be facilitated by

- **offering children choices** that give them appropriate control over their environment, for example, choosing what activities they do, the amount of food they eat, whether they rest or sleep at nap time, etc.
- "**scaffolding**" **the experience**—providing children with opportunities that challenge them, but are within their ability, for example, a child accomplishes the task of dressing for outdoor activities in winter by mastering one article of clothing at a time
- **identifying and reinforcing competence**—highlighting small changes or accomplishments for the child, for example, "*You remembered to ride your trike in the right direction so you don't bump into people. You are thinking about riding safely.*"





MASTERY THROUGH GROUP PROBLEM SOLVING: A CASE STUDY

The following case study illustrates how one teacher, Yfeng Zhang, promoted **mastery** in a group of five-year-olds by engaging them in a decision-making process about some problems in their classroom. She adapted the CAR model to make it child-friendly, and used it to help children come up with alternative ways to solve a conflict (**generating alternatives**).

All six children sitting at my table during lunchtime wanted to play with the Magic Board right after lunch, but we had only one Magic Board. Some children consistently got upset because they were not able to have a turn.

To solve this problem, I held a group discussion with these five-year-olds and helped them generate alternatives. We started out with the CAR model. I asked them why some children were upset so often because of the Magic Board. With this question, they identified the Circumstance (C) and their Automatic thoughts (A). Almost everybody said that they couldn't get turns (C) and they thought it was unfair (A). When asked how they felt when they couldn't get a turn, they identified the Reaction (R). One said, "Mad"; three said, "Sad"; one said, "Don't know"; and one said, "OK."

We then began to generate alternatives. I asked them how we could solve the problem so that everybody would be happy and everybody would get a turn using the Magic Board. Some of them suggested that they should share; some suggested that people who behaved well at the lunch table should get the turn; some said that they did not know; and some suggested that we should make a schedule.

Finally, we all agreed to make a schedule. Then we developed a plan and worked out a schedule together. The schedule was helpful in two ways. It helped the children respect each other's right to use the Magic Board, and it helped them remember the sequence of their turns.

The success of the group discussion for the Magic Board challenge helped us solve another problem. Right before lunch, each child in my group would try to wash her/his hands as fast as possible so s/he would be able to sit on the chair next to mine at the lunch table. Several times, some children were so upset about not being able to sit in the chair beside me that they refused to eat lunch.

I used the same strategy as above, and it worked out very well. Through a group discussion, we again agreed to make a schedule for sitting on the special chair. Since two schedules are hard to remember, I suggested that we use the same schedule for using the Magic Board and sitting on the special chair. The children all agreed. They said it feels like a "super duper day" when their turn comes up on the schedule. This schedule has been in effect for about a month, and no fighting for the Magic Board or the chair has recurred. The children have been following the schedule very nicely.

Based on the above two episodes of making schedules, it appears that group discussion can be an effective method for teaching age-appropriate resiliency skills.

With a teacher's guidance in group discussions, five-year-olds can use the CAR model, generate alternatives, and develop new solutions. The process can help children develop impulse control, emotional regulation, and problem-solving skills.



Gaining “positivity”

Positivity relates to children’s feelings toward, and connection to, significant adults in their lives. Adults can enhance children’s experience of “positivity” in the following ways:

- We can provide children with unconditional love, by letting them know that they are accepted as a person even if their behaviour is sometimes not appropriate. For example, we might say, *“I like YOU, but I don’t like when you hit me. Next time, you can ask for my help if you’re frustrated.”*
- We can help children refrain from focusing on the negative by first validating their feelings, then encouraging them to actively search for the positive or controllable aspects of situations. For example, if a child says, *“This whole day has been terrible!”* the teacher could respond:

“Mmm, you sound pretty upset. Let’s think about your day so far.”

“Remember making the puzzle with Jonah? You worked hard together and you got the puzzle finished! What was that part of the day like for you?”

“Let’s think about what we had for lunch ...pineapple slices. Aren’t they one of your favourites? What other desserts do you like?”

“Let’s think about something else you like to do and I can help you get started.”

- We can boost children’s self-esteem by encouraging their efforts and accomplishments using descriptions of what we see in their actions. For example, we might say, *“I see you have been working hard to tidy up. You put all the blocks back in the bin.”* Or, we might say, *“I see everyone sitting quietly. You are getting good at waiting.”*

Genuine self-esteem is gained through a sense of mastery and self-efficacy. Using “descriptive feedback” is a way to help children see the relationship between their actions and the outcomes, feel encouraged by their efforts, and own their achievements.

In addition, describing what we see helps us avoid using empty praise, such as, *“Good job!”* or *“Good girl/boy!”*

Research also shows that we can help children develop a “growth mindset” to increase their confidence, perseverance and willingness to make mistakes when trying new things. We can do this by noticing their effort instead of praising their intelligence or talent.²⁵

Adult modelling of resilience

Adult modelling relates to the thinking and coping styles that children are exposed to, and to how well adults around them challenge their own thinking habits. Adult modelling of resilient (accurate and flexible) or positive thinking styles is crucial during children’s early years.

How can we model resilient thinking and coping styles?

Talk “out loud” about our thoughts

We can model accurate and flexible thinking by talking “out loud” about our own struggles and encounters with daily stress:

“Right now, I feel frustrated because I can’t get the lid off the jar. I will try one more time, then I will ask Marina for help.”

“Sometimes I feel angry when”

“Whoops, I spilled the milk. I’ll get a towel to wipe it up.”

Talking out loud helps children see that stressful situations don’t have to last forever, which reduces “Always” thinking. It also demonstrates that these situations don’t have to affect everything else, which diminishes “Everything” thinking. In addition, children begin to learn that stressful situations are rarely the result of just one person, thereby reducing “Me”/“Not me” thinking.



Model calming and focusing

Adults can model and talk about strategies that help them calm down, refocus their attention, and put things into perspective. Strategies include:

- taking three deep breaths and counting out loud: *“I was feeling angry. So, I took three deep breaths and counted to five. Now I feel calmer. That helps me talk nicely to others.”*



- changing the environment by turning off some lights or putting on quiet music: *“When I put on quiet music, it helps me feel calm inside.”* Or, *“Let’s turn off some lights. That will help us all calm down a bit.”*
- choosing a quiet activity: *“Everyone is pretty loud and jittery right now. Let’s calm down in our ‘quiet spot’ and read a story.”*
- waiting to see what happens: *“I’m not going to worry about that right now. It might not even happen. If it does, I’ll deal with it then.”*

When we are calm and relaxed, chances are better the children will be calm and relaxed. In addition, maintaining a sense of calm helps us “catch ourselves” before we make statements based on thinking habits and traps that may not demonstrate a resilient response to the situation.

Some children, due to their temperament, find it more challenging than others to calm themselves and bounce back from challenges and adversity. It’s harder for these children to cope with change or to risk trying new things, so they can benefit from additional patience and encouragement from the significant adults in their lives.

Many children are overstimulated by noisy environments, bright lights and colors, and too many things posted on the walls. Creating a physical environment that addresses these issues will help these children feel more relaxed, able to self-regulate and make positive behaviour choices.²⁶

Summary of Guide 8

The importance of relationships and role modelling



How do our relationships with children affect their resilience?

Research shows that the quality of our relationships with young children

- has a critical impact on children’s developing brain and resilience
- cushions children from risk factors such as poverty, inadequate parenting, abuse, and neglect
- helps children develop self-efficacy, the belief in their ability to influence the world

Self-efficacy precedes the development of self-esteem.

How can we support children’s self-efficacy?

Social psychologist Dr. Martin Seligman suggests that caregivers can help young children develop self-efficacy by providing them with opportunities to:

- **experience true mastery**—offering choices, scaffolding challenges, identifying and reinforcing competence
- **gain a perspective of “positivity”**—providing unconditional love, offering guidance in identifying positive aspects of a situation, using “descriptive feedback” to encourage children’s efforts and to promote a “growth mindset”
- **observe adults modelling positive thinking & coping skills**—verbalizing positive thoughts, demonstrating calming and focusing strategies

If we are aware of our own thinking styles and consciously challenge our thinking habits, we are more likely to model a resilient response.

Some children, due to their temperament, need additional patience and encouragement from adults to help them cope more successfully with stress and frustration.

A calm, uncluttered physical environment can help children who are easily overstimulated to self-regulate and make positive behaviour choices.