

# FAMILY

RESILIENCE

## The Fourth R: Resilience

Want to raise a smart, confident, capable child? Give him room to take risks, make mistakes, and learn how to bounce back.

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PHOTOS KATHRYN GAMBLE

**W**inning isn't everything, as the saying goes. Nor is it the only thing. It is, however, most definitely a thing. And, as more and more research shows, the experience of winning and its more common counterpart, losing, is an important part of how a child learns the crucial skills that will give him confidence in any situation, no matter how daunting. After years of trophies handed out for just showing up to the game and gold stars for everyone, the self-esteem movement is running out of steam. "The idea was that if you make your child feel good, he'll do good," says Madeline Levine, Ph.D., psychologist and author of *Teach Your Children Well*. "But think about what really boosts your confidence: It's not when someone says you're the best. It's when you feel you've mastered something."

The self-esteem movement, research now shows, has actually shortchanged kids, leaving them high on gold stars but low on the kind of resilience that helps them bounce back when they don't score a goal, ace a test, or get a part in the play. And not equipping

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kids to handle adversity can lead to more than disappointment. In one study, Stanford researcher Carol Dweck, Ph.D., found that kids whose parents praised them for being smart didn't do as well in school as children whose parents praised them for their effort. Dweck's research also discovered that a childhood filled with a barrage of you-can-do-no-wrong praise dampens a child's motivation to go the extra mile, especially when it comes to activities or subjects that aren't his strengths.

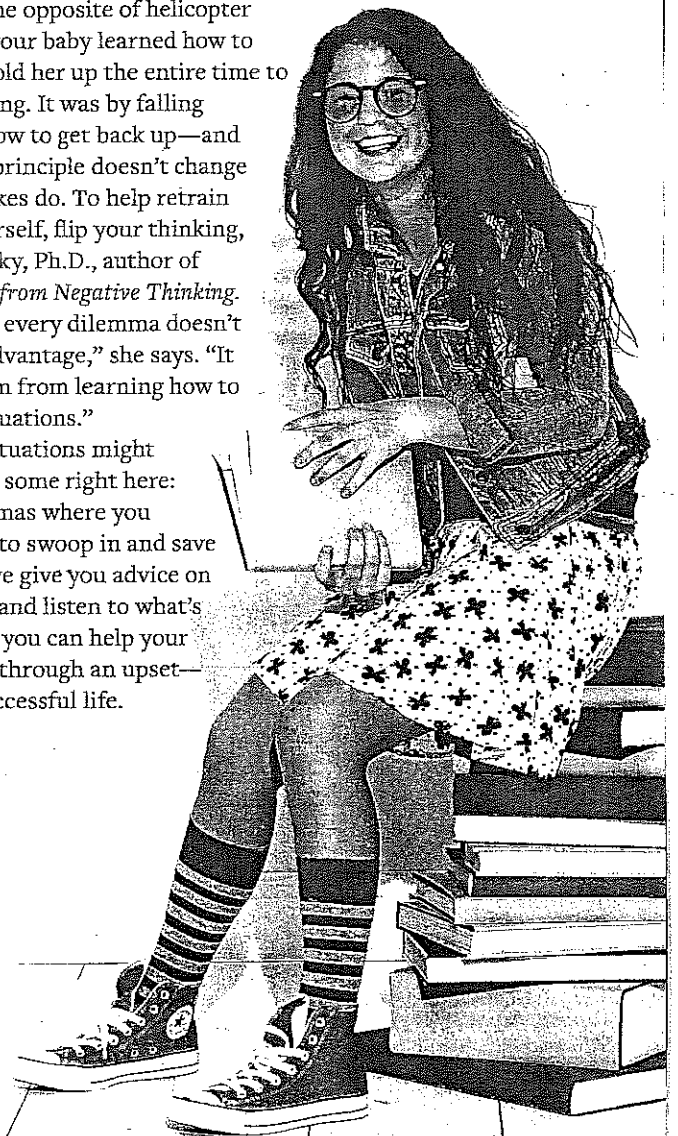
So what should you do to build resilience in your child? Resilience grows, Levine says, when children experiment, take risks, make mistakes, get hurt, feel disappointed (sometimes bitterly so), and then figure out—mostly on their own—how to recover.

Think of it as the opposite of helicopter parenting. When your baby learned how to walk, you didn't hold her up the entire time to keep her from falling. It was by falling that she learned how to get back up—and stay up. Well, the principle doesn't change even when the stakes do. To help retrain (and restrain) yourself, flip your thinking, says Tamar Chansky, Ph.D., author of *Freeing Your Child from Negative Thinking*. "Stepping in to fix every dilemma doesn't give children an advantage," she says. "It actually stops them from learning how to handle difficult situations."

What kind of situations might that be? We've got some right here: typical school dramas where you might be tempted to swoop in and save the day. Instead, we give you advice on how to stop, look, and listen to what's really going on, so you can help your child find her way through an upset—and to a happy, successful life.

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STUDY: MUELLER, C. M. & DWECK, C. S., JOURNALS



## MAKING THE GRADE

**THE SCENARIO:** Your fourth-grade son is great at math and science but doesn't excel at reading (though he's not failing). He says he's "just not good at it" and tries to avoid discussing the topic.

**THE STRATEGY:** Instead of instantly hiring a tutor, talk to your child about how he feels. Does he want to try to get better? How could he achieve that? Opening a line of discussion will gently prompt him to figure out that (a) he can't be the best in every subject and (b) if he wants to change the situation, he can. Your goal is to help him realize that his own efforts and initiative are what lead to his success. "Resilience in this case is about empowering your child to become a problem solver," Chansky says.

**FLIP YOUR SCRIPT:** Just because your son doesn't shine at every academic subject doesn't mean he's doomed to failure. Everyone—including wildly successful people—has weaknesses. It's how you handle those weaknesses vis-à-vis your strengths that matters. And remember, a child's skill set and competencies are still shifting and developing in elementary school.

**THE SCENARIO:** Your daughter has always loved her teachers, but this year she's complaining that one teacher is mean and unfair.

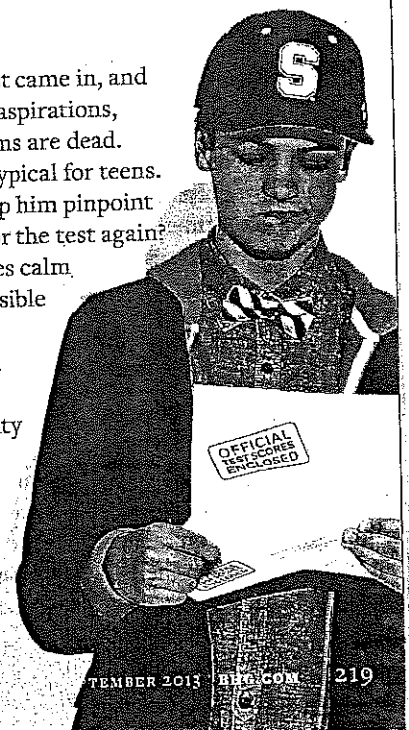
**THE STRATEGY:** You're reaching for the phone to dial the principal's office, aren't you? Wait. Once you're sure that there isn't something egregious going on (the teacher is humiliating students, for example), talk to your daughter about exactly what bugs her. "She's mean" is general. "The teacher doesn't give clear directions" or "She gives too many pop quizzes" are details you can work with to brainstorm ways to improve the situation. Maybe your daughter can raise her hand and ask more questions rather than sitting and stewing. Or she can do a little extra prep to be ready for a pop quiz.

**FLIP YOUR SCRIPT:** It's hard to say no when your child is asking (or begging) you to work your magic. But part of being successful in the working world is learning how to cope with all kinds of people, and often that means figuring out how to tweak your behavior to function more smoothly in certain situations.

**THE SCENARIO:** Standardized test scores just came in, and your high school junior, who has big college aspirations, didn't do great. Now he's saying all his dreams are dead.

**THE STRATEGY:** All-or-nothing thinking is typical for teens. Empathize with his disappointment, but help him pinpoint possible steps he can take. Can he sign up for the test again? Would a prep course or relaxation techniques calm pretest jitters? Can he expand his list of possible schools? Help him realize that there are ways to change his course of action and still achieve his goals.

**FLIP YOUR SCRIPT:** Use this as an opportunity to practice what Levine calls "tolerating failure." If you show your son that a poor test result is a "failure" you can bear—and one he can bounce back from—he'll develop the ability to adjust to shifts in plans and expectations throughout life.



## LIVING SOCIAL

**THE SCENARIO:** Your fifth-grader has had the same friends since kindergarten. Until this year. Suddenly she's hearing that there's "no room" at her old pals' lunch table.

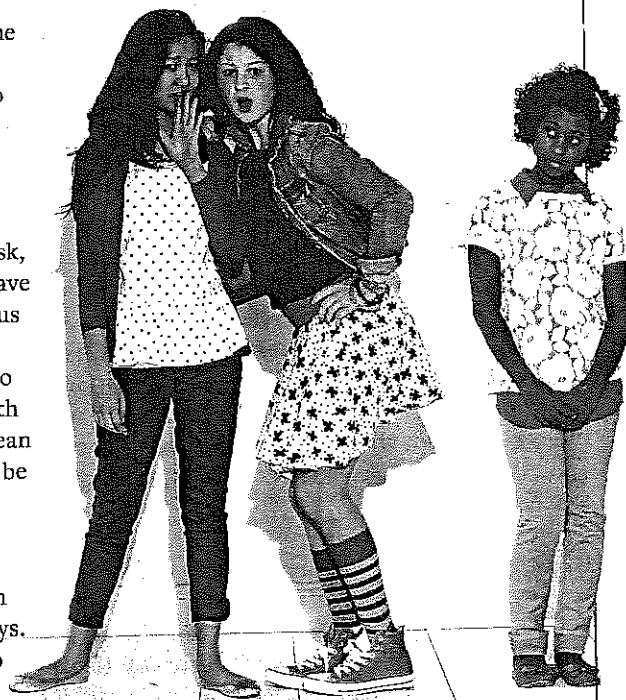
**THE STRATEGY:** As your daughter goes through her range of (totally normal) feelings—hurt, anger, disappointment—acknowledge them, comfort her, and then ask, "What do *you* want to do?" She might not have answers, but you can help her explore various options, such as reaching out to one good friend, approaching another group of girls to sit with at lunch, or spending more time with friends outside school. And don't dis the mean girls—next week the very same ones might be renewed BFFs.

**FLIP YOUR SCRIPT:** Seeing your child experience social rejection can be excruciating, but friendship dramas happen at this age—and throughout life, Levine says. This is an opportunity for your daughter to learn how to manage her feelings, evaluate her behavior, and figure out whether—and when—she has to move on to different friends.

**THE SCENARIO:** Your son worked up the nerve to ask a girl he liked to the eighth-grade dance—and she turned him down.

**THE STRATEGY:** Your ultimate aim is for your child to have enough confidence to get past no, but you also want him to accept—and not be crushed by—the reality that not everyone will like him. "What he needs right now is empathy," says Vicki Hoefle, parent educator and author of *Duct Tape Parenting*. "So resist the urge to say something sweeping like 'Everyone loves you!' That feels comforting, but sends the message that he won't be in this situation again. This is a great time for a conversation about how life contains many more nos than yeses, which only makes the yeses more sweet."

**FLIP YOUR SCRIPT:** This is another situation in which tolerating his pain—and giving him perspective—helps him calm down and do the same. Don't trash-talk the girl who rejected him. Why? Well, he asked her because he liked her. But even more important, you'll ultimately be undermining his self-confidence (and his resilience) by instilling in him the notion that it's all someone else's fault.



**THE SCENARIO:** While she's on Facebook, your daughter sees photos from a party that she wasn't invited to.

**THE STRATEGY:** First, help her put the situation in perspective: She's not going to be invited to every single event, and that's OK. Then encourage her to take control over her social world. She can't help what others post, but she can hide friends' feeds if they're hurtful or exclusionary. "Something about social media sites makes kids feel like they can't turn away. So they keep looking and keep feeling bad," Dr. Chansky says. Also point out that she can be the one to initiate social gatherings: She can coordinate a night at the movies or a get-together at your house. This helps her understand the two-way nature of friendship and see that she's not a put-upon victim.

**FLIP YOUR SCRIPT:** You were eager to protect your child from being left out when she was little, but give her some power in this situation, Chansky says. She will more readily develop social maturity as she realizes that she's an active participant in her social life. Try to look at these problems not as a chance to place blame, but as a way for your child to grow stronger.



## TEAMING UP

**THE SCENARIO:** Your 10-year-old wants to try out for the dance team, but you're pretty sure she won't make the cut. Plus, it'd be a big commitment along with her tennis and music lessons.

**THE STRATEGY:** Absolutely support her desire to go for the team, Hoefle says. Kids need to test their limits. Balance your support with realism by saying, "Lots of girls are going for just a few spots, so remember that no matter what happens you can still take lessons and enjoy dancing." Also, remind her of her other commitments, and discuss prioritizing her interests and not taking on too much at once. She may decide not to try for the team—or to drop one of her other activities. But you want her to come to that conclusion herself.

**FLIP YOUR SCRIPT:** It's hard to encourage your child to go out there and possibly get hurt, but for your daughter to be able to say "I took a risk," even if it doesn't work out, only builds her confidence.

**THE SCENARIO:** Your son blew his solo in the high school musical on opening night thanks to stage fright. He's now pleading with you to help him back out.

**THE STRATEGY:** He'll want to pull the covers over his head for a while—go ahead and let him. But don't let him quit the show. We all embarrass ourselves; it's how we stand up to those missteps that builds character. Forcing your son to face down his flub will help him realize that he has the strength to overcome mistakes—big and small.

**FLIP YOUR SCRIPT:** Remember that the pain of watching him struggle through his fears and challenges will pale in comparison to seeing him flee them.

**THE SCENARIO:** Your high school freshman wants to quit the sport she's been playing since she was a kid.

**THE STRATEGY:** First, discuss her choice. Ask why she wants to quit and what changed. If she proves her decision isn't capricious, respect it. "Teens are always saying, 'My parents don't listen,' and often that's accurate," Levine says. We jump in so fast with our reasoning that we stop hearing theirs.

**FLIP YOUR SCRIPT:** Validating her thinking shows that you trust she can make good decisions. You're there to guide your children to the best possible decisions, but ultimately you have to step back and let them make their own choices. It's part of what adolescence is all about: separating from family and developing your own voice. ■

