

## **SIX WAYS TO RAISE A RESILIENT CHILD**

### **Acknowledgement: Dr Rangan Chatterjee, author of *The Stress Solution***

Want to help your children deal with stress and adversity? It's easier than you think and can help our children navigate the stresses of daily life. While we may not be able to remove all their challenges, we can help them build resilience — the ability to overcome difficult experiences and be shaped positively by them. Our brains respond to the information around us, so resilience can be taught, modelled and nurtured at any age.

### **Have one-on-one time with each child, without distractions**

Resilience comes from relationships; children need nurturing. It's not a magical inner strength that helps kids through tough times; instead, it's the reliable presence of one, supportive relationship — be it parent, teacher, relative or family friend. It's quality, not quantity that counts. Ten minutes of fully-focused attention is better than an hour when your mind is on other things. If you're on your phone at the dinner table, you're teaching them it's OK to always be distracted. And that they are not important enough for your sole attention. Make bathtime, car journeys, meals and queues count. Chat, listen, talk about your feelings and encourage them to express theirs. Once these one-to-ones become regular, your children will know they always have a safe space to open up.

### **Give sleep a chance**

Lack of good-quality sleep is a huge driver for stress. It has a negative effect on memory, concentration, cognitive function, and decision making. One of the fastest ways to improve sleep is to limit screen time before bed. Issue a household ban on devices at least an hour before bedtime. Turn off the wifi, if need be. Earlier in the evening, insist everyone uses nighttime mode on their devices, which swaps the blue light for a warmer glow. It's also worth switching your children's night lights to red ones, as red has the least impact on melatonin production.

### **Get out and exercise**

As well as keeping them physically fit, exercise will increase children's resilience. It actually strengthens the brain. Regular physical activity teaches our stress-response system to recover more efficiently. Put on the radio before dinner and dance around in the kitchen. Join your kids doing squats, star jumps, bear crawls or frog hops. Walk the dog together or go for a family bicycle ride.

### **Teach delayed gratification**

Resilience means understanding you can't always have what you want as soon as you want it. It's an important concept to pass on in the age of Amazon Prime, Spotify, Netflix and Uber. Psychology teaches us that people who can accept delayed gratification lead happier, healthier lives. Without the ability to defer pleasure and reward, our kids are losing an important skill for their wellbeing.

One of the best ways to teach it? Playing board games. These require impulse control, turn-taking, and mental flexibility. They exercise the prefrontal cortex, the rational part of the brain involved in decision making, emotional regulation and, yes, resilience. Board games are also a good way for you to model resilience by being a good loser. But there is no shortage of other ways to encourage delayed gratification: learning a musical instrument, listening to whole albums instead of skipping from track to track online, mastering a new sport, even watching a TV series together week by week, instead of bingeing in a couple of sittings.

### **Eat the alphabet**

Nutrition has a significant impact on mental health. Good-quality food changes the composition of our gut bugs, which helps send calm signals to the brain. Poor-quality, highly-

processed food sends stress signals instead. A diverse diet, rich in fibre, will lead to greater diversity in our gut bugs, which in turn will help make us more resilient, and anxiety and depression less likely. Persuading kids to eat more healthily can feel like an uphill battle, especially if they're fussy, so this is not about becoming a top chef — just trying a few tricks that can really benefit them emotionally. I like to challenge the whole family to 'eat the alphabet' over 30 days. I think it's a realistic goal to consume 26 different plant foods in a month: A for asparagus, B for banana, C for chickpeas, and so on. It turns healthy eating into a game, and encourages children to try new foods. Turn it into a competition and see who can tick off all the letters first.

### **Model gratitude**

Instead of pestering your children with questions such as, 'How was school?' and 'What did you do today?', teach them to reframe their day.

The following is a game I learned from a friend, who played it with his daughter over dinner. Everyone must answer three questions:

- 1) What did someone do today to make you happy?
- 2) What did you do to make someone else happy?
- 3) What have you learned today?

I love this simple exercise for how it helps us all find the positive in every day. It teaches gratitude, nurtures optimism, and recognises kindness. It doesn't matter what may have happened at work or school, or how stressed any of us may have felt when we sat down at the table; the whole mood seems to lift once we've played this game. I learn things about my kids that they'd probably never have thought to tell me otherwise. Try it. It might just become the highlight of your day.