



South Southwest (HHS Region 6)

MHTTC

Mental Health Technology Transfer Center Network

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## Fostering Resilience in Families during Uncertain Times

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The coronavirus pandemic has disrupted life as we know it. The impact of it is felt in the mental health of children and families worldwide. Prevention strategies used to stop the spread of the coronavirus pose challenges to the education system, school-age children, and the families trying to support their education. More than at any other time in history, families are feeling the challenges of supporting the health and emotional well-being of the children in their care. At the same time, they are grappling with many unknowns and changes in many other areas of life.

### Defining Resilience:

Resilience is defined as the process of “bouncing back,” or adapting in the face of hard times, trauma, or significant sources of stress.<sup>i</sup> Great challenges exist because of this pandemic and can take many forms. These challenges can affect our social, emotional and financial lives. Resilience tells us that these problems don’t have to cause bad outcomes. Even in the face of hard times, there are areas of life in which one can exercise control; change their perspective and potentially grow stronger from it. Resilience not only helps one bounce back, it can also drive empowerment and emotional growth.

The important thing to remember about resilience is that it is not a fixed trait or factor that either exists or doesn’t exist in a person. Rather, it is a set of behaviors, thoughts and actions that - when practiced repeatedly - can be strengthened. It is like a muscle that becomes stronger when we use it. Resilience is an ordinary response that can be fostered at home with the child in your care before, during, and after a crisis. We help our children build their resilience skills to support their mental health and recovery.

### The Role of Equity & Resilience

Your family will experience the pandemic differently than other families, because everyone has their own unique reality and circumstances. The qualities that create your identity, such as your race, gender identity, cultural background, nationality, social and economic status, religion, sexual orientation, physical abilities, and other identities, can define your family’s experience. Your support network and family make-up also have an effect. Unfair practices that exist within our healthcare systems and workplaces can greatly affect the way your family and loved ones’ health and finances are affected during the pandemic.<sup>ii</sup>

### Fostering Resilience through Self-Compassion

Self-compassion is the oxygen mask caregivers must put on before helping others in their family and under their care. Self-compassion is the opposite of self-judgment. It brings acceptance to our experience, acceptance of what is happening, and acceptance of our reaction to it. Self-compassion activates the care-giving system and moves us to act, care, and protect. This can facilitate pro-social behaviors linked to resilience.<sup>iii</sup>

- **Be gentle with yourself and modify your expectations as needed.** This is a time of uncertainty, with lots of information to absorb. Schools and others may try to reach out, with many things to read regarding your child. You

may be juggling multiple priorities and demands. This is an important time to take a step back, practice self-compassion, and adjust your expectations.

- **Expect and normalize the many ways your child may experience this pandemic.** For example, your child(ren) may experience going backwards in things that they have learned, or in ways they are expressing themselves. Children's brains are trying to make sense of the new routines, in addition to anxieties and other changes that may be taking place. This may cause them to temporarily go backwards in an area they have already learned. Practice compassion and tell them they are not alone in this experience.
- **Gain more comfort and practice in saying, "I don't know."** Children may ask questions that you may not know the answers to. This may cause frustration or discomfort for both the child(ren) and the caregiver. Understand that your child may be experiencing feelings around loss of control, and asking questions is one way to gain understanding. Expressing calm compassion around things we cannot control or may not fully understand can help the child feel heard. While it may not change that reality, it can help them feel less alone.
- **Practice and model self-compassion while building and encouraging yourself and your family to have a more compassionate view of your current situation.** The reality is that the pandemic has created a stressful and uncertain time. Reminding yourself and your child(ren) that they are not alone in this experience, that their responses (grief, anger, sadness, guilt, frustration) are real, can connect them to their common humanity.
- **Most importantly, offer yourself, your children, and your family, kindness.** Ask, "What can I do for myself now?" Encouraging self-care and creating realistic self-care plans as a family can be helpful in developing coping skills.
- **Reaching out for professional help or other support networks is a great way to practice self-compassion.** In as much as you can, try to speak with other adults who have children under their care. This not only models self-compassion, but provides connection, another critical part of resilience. Learn more about how to practice self-compassion [here](#).<sup>iv</sup>

## Fostering Resilience through Connection

A child's connections with stable adults, peers, and role models at home, in their schools, and in their communities, can provide security and help your child(ren) develop essential coping skills.

- **Create a schedule or basic time frames when your child(ren) can connect with others.** Routines help your child(ren) feel calm because they know what to expect. Connecting with other children helps them to understand that this is the new normal.
- **Ask your child(ren) if there is anyone in their class or environment that they want to schedule a virtual play date with.** Getting their feedback and working hard to meet that need can help children feel valued.
- **Focus on community.** What communities do you belong to and how can you sustain contact with a sense of balance? Asking yourself these questions and finding small ways to build connection can go a long way in fostering resilience.

## Fostering Resilience by Increasing a Sense of Control & Empowerment

Using language to express feelings and make meaning from an experience can support feelings of control and empowerment. These feelings of control and empowerment can promote and sustain children's resilience.

- **Engage in play with your child(ren) as much as possible.** Children may lack the words to express their anxiety, frustration, disappointment and feelings of loss. Play is one way to build their language and process what is going on.
- **Support your child in finding the language to express their feelings and experiences.** They may not have the words to describe their feelings. This helps organize their story of what is happening. Having the ability to identify, express and manage feelings increases a student's knowledge and ability to navigate their world.
- **Create a space for expressing all feelings and not just the ones that are comfortable.** The reality is that their world shifted in significant ways, their ability to socialize and celebrate milestones has been interrupted. Disappointment, anger, sadness, and loss are feelings that may accompany these interruptions.

- **Provide opportunities and space for your child to make meaning out of the situation using creative and/or physical activities.** Creative activities often allow space for working through feelings. This helps develop control of the story one tells themselves.
- **Listen for and get curious about your child(ren)'s feelings.** Some feelings, like sadness, can sound like boredom or frustration. Acknowledging, naming and understanding feelings can increase feelings of control and empower your child(ren).

## Fostering Resilience through Self-Efficacy and Coping

Having the belief you can do something and engaging in positive coping can support and promote resilience. Self-efficacy relates to one's belief in their ability to do things. Self-efficacy reflects confidence in your ability to have control over your motivation, behavior, and environment.<sup>v</sup>

- **Promote self-efficacy through small tasks you know your child can do and engage your child(ren) in areas that they enjoy and feel good about (i.e., strengths).** This can increase feelings of control and empowerment, as well as know-how and confidence handling difficult situations.
- **Encourage child(ren) to participate in activities that can help them find purpose in their environment, such as connecting to something bigger.** This can include simple tasks such as gardening, creating art, or caring for a pet. This can support their development of self-awareness and make them feel as though they are contributing.
- **Model wellness practices that make sense for your family and your situation.** This can include taking a walk or providing time outdoors, scheduling calls with family and friends, or cooking a meal. Remember that wellness can look differently for different people and small actions can go a long way.

## Conclusion

Challenging times are an opportunity to strengthen relationships, and build our resilience skills, making us ready for future challenges. This may require that families and learning communities re-envision an environment where children and youth can feel more empowered, where they can develop a language for feelings, making meaning of the situation, and resetting routines and expectations to meet new realities.

*For more information about the South Southwest Mental Health Technology Transfer Center or to schedule a training or consultation, please visit our website, <https://mhffcnetwork.org/centers/south-southwest-mhffc/home>, or contact Nadia K. Maynard, Trauma-Informed/Healing-Centered Practices Specialist ([Nadia.Kalinchuk@austin.utexas.edu](mailto:Nadia.Kalinchuk@austin.utexas.edu)).*

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## References:

<sup>i</sup> <https://www.apa.org/topics/resilience>

<sup>ii</sup> National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine; Health and Medicine Division; Board on Population Health and Public Health Practice; Committee on Community-Based Solutions to Promote Health Equity in the United States; Baciu A, Negussie Y, Geller A, et al., editors. Communities in Action: Pathways to Health Equity. Washington (DC): National Academies Press (US); 2017 Jan 11. 3, The Root Causes of Health Inequity. Available from: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK425845/>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://self-compassion.org/>

<sup>iv</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jJ9wGfwE-YE&feature=youtu.be>

<sup>v</sup> Bandura, A. (1997). Self-Efficacy: The exercise of control. New York, NY: W. H. Freeman.