

How independence-building is the pathway to your child's resilience

Parents often ask me how to build resilience in kids.

Our response is always the same: "Start by building independence and resilience will follow."

Here's how.

Children are hardwired for independence

Sometime around the age of fifteen months, give or take three months, most children will make a strong case for self-sufficiency. They demand to do things their own way. This demand is soon backed by a strong voice – "NOOOO!" – and then more articulate cries of "I can do it!" as their third birthday approaches.

This is the time to harness your child's push for independence and self-sufficiency. Their desire for independence and mastery over their immediate environment will see most children take incredible physical risks in the form of play and exploration of that environment. Concerned parents will naturally minimise risks by moving furniture around, keeping doors closed and hiding sharp implements, to name a few protective measures.

But parents can't eradicate all risks. Kids will fall and hurt themselves ... but they'll also get up and go again. In time, they'll learn to assess situations, stare down their fears and test themselves out in new situations. Falling down, brushing yourself off and trying again is part of the natural learning experience for most young children. Parents don't have to do much more than assess a situation for real dangers, then stand back and allow their kids to explore their environments, pulling them up only when their play and explorations transgress the rights and peace of others.

So what's this got to do with resilience?

Well, everything really. Independence is the pursuit of mastery over one's self and one's environment and rarely happens without mishaps and mistakes. It nearly always involves hurt, hardship, frustration and fear. That's where resilience comes in. Resilience is the art of bouncing forward after experiencing these hurts, hardships, frustrations and fears. Resilience is what comes from seeking out self-sufficiency and independence.

The language of independence

The fact that there's a whole genre of language devoted to resilience (mostly cloaked in cliché) is no accident. Terms such as "Get back on the bike/horse when you fall off", "Come on, brush yourself off and get on with it" or "What doesn't kill you makes you strong" are built into the psyche of past generations. Many parents today will cringe at these terms as they appear a little callous and out of touch. Conversely most current parents' relationship with risk and adventure – both required for independence-building – is very tenuous at best, non-existent at worst.

Therein lies the challenge. I haven't met a parent, carer or teacher who doesn't want the children in their care to develop resilience that will last a lifetime. Yet many of those same adults will block the pathway to children's resilience by over-indulging them, solving their problems and not giving them real responsibility. In doing so they deny kids the sense of mastery that comes from sorting out their own problems, getting themselves out of jams and getting up after a fall.

You can never love your children too much, but you can love them helplessly. That's what happens when we deny kids the opportunity to become truly independent and self-sufficient. Deny self-sufficiency and you block a child's resilience. Develop real independence and you open a pathway to resilience that will last a lifetime.

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