

# Recovery: Strengthening Resiliency in Children

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Why are some children, despite poverty, handicaps, economic hardship or a miserable home environment able to adjust to or overcome misfortune or sustained life stress? What quality do they possess? “Resiliency” is one way of describing this quality. Young people who are resilient despite long-range stress often:

- have the support of a trusted adult outside the family—a favorite teacher, a close relative or neighbor, or a member of the clergy;
- have a constructive, problem-solving approach to life;
- have learned a sense of responsibility and caring, and are willing to help others; and
- believe that, in the end, things will work out in a positive way for the future.

When economic conditions threaten a family, individuals within it cannot always depend on one another exclusively as a source of support. Their own personal suffering can weaken their ability to care for each other. Others in the community—relatives, friends, neighbors, teachers—may be needed to provide support.

**Take notice.** The first step is for adults to be aware of what is happening to young people under stress and to watch for the danger signals that indicate that a situation is becoming too much for a young person’s ability to cope.

**Reach out.** Once a parent or adult friend realizes that a child is suffering, the next step is to make an effort to reach out. Concern has to be translated into action. Parents can help by setting aside some time to relax and enjoy the company of their children. Reading to a child, playing games or going for a walk are statements that parents care and that their child is an important part of their lives.

It’s important to maintain a child’s involvement with school, friends and other activities. If a family attends church, for example, parents could encourage their children to continue to meet with the church youth group. Maintaining a child’s normal, everyday routine also has the advantage of providing contact with other caring adults who can offer support and encouragement at a time when parents themselves are under stress.

**Listen.** Friends and families *must take time to listen*. An important way to put stress into perspective is to talk about it with someone willing to listen. Listening is a powerful form of support because it conveys acceptance and caring. It also provides an opportunity for a young person to think out loud and better understand how he or she is reacting to a problem and what alternatives might be available. Caring and listening let children know that others believe in them. Caring also means helping young people put problems into perspective so they won’t unfairly blame themselves or others.

**Help youth understand.** A fourth important form of support is to *help children understand what is happening*. Sometimes parents may not inform their children about economic problems because they want to protect them. Or, they may not want to discuss the seriousness of a situation because they hope to remedy a problem in secret. But keeping children in the dark makes them feel like outsiders and prevents parents from gaining the support of their children as the family faces and attempts to overcome challenges. Giving children the information they need to understand adversity helps develop the constructive problem solving approach to life characteristic of resiliency.

**Forward thinking.** And, most importantly, adults can *encourage forward thinking*, talking with children about their future and nurturing a feeling of confidence or faith that things will work out. For older children this may involve re-thinking career goals.

As part of this future focus, adults should also encourage children to treat each other with compassion and support. Children in families who are coping with economic crisis or business failure can be important sources of strength for other children going through similar experiences.

Adults must take the initiative to reach out, to show children they care by helping them understand, by listening to them and encouraging them to look positively to the future.

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