

Proactive Parenting: March 2016

Building Resilience: Regulation and Resolution

Lately, parents of children of all ages, may be just as likely to hear about the importance of 'Grit' and resilience as they are the Common Core or SAT's. Last month I shared six life skills children need to thrive in life. Of the six, self-regulation, and problem solving, are two cornerstones for building grit and resilience. In order to cope with life's big and little challenges and attend to the three 'R's of reading, (w)riting, and 'rithmetic, etc., children need help to develop regulation and resolution. "Without teaching the skills that help children move through their emotions, we are truly asking them to do the impossible." (Richard Davidson). Picture the three year old having a temper tantrum, or eight year old who is really frustrated by their math homework, or any of the myriad of times children get upset, angry, or frustrated, and completely meltdown.

Regulation involves being able to identify and express emotions in healthy ways, physically, verbally, etc. Young children need lots of help identifying what they are feeling and why. In early childhood especially, emotional reactions can be swift and intense, so kids need help to learn how to calm down by; moving to a quieter place, taking deep breaths, counting to ten, taking a walk, or anything else that helps children blow off steam and regain control. Just as infants need to learn to self soothe to get back to sleep, children need to be taught calming strategies, and with practice, will discover which ones work best for them. Narrating what you see and hear as a child is ramping up emotionally, is an instructive tool, as in; "Your face is telling me that you are very mad that we don't have time to do the game you wanted to do." It also helps to narrate when we experience strong feelings, as in; "I'm (Mom/ Dad) feeling really frustrated because I hoped we could go see a movie but no one has done their chores yet."

We can teach kids to cue into their rising anger, frustration, anxiety, etc., and adults can sometimes avert emotional overload by being alert to triggers, like when a child is overly tired or hungry, or with a peer who often pushes their buttons. Adults can step in and diffuse building emotions by; giving targeted support and lowering expectations a bit, providing a distraction, or moving to a different area when possible. If your best efforts are thwarted it helps to remember that in the midst of a huge tantrum or emotional meltdown, children's brains are unable to process many (or any) words. 'Less is more' is a good rule of thumb; such as; "I can help when your body and/or voice is calmer." A silent and supportive but firm presence is generally best until a child begins to regain some control. Even then it is helpful to wait until later in the day to process the event and come up with a plan together for how they might handle things differently. When children learn to calm down, process what has happened, come up with a different plan, and sense when to ask for help, they can become proactive rather than reactive.

In his bestselling book: "How Children Succeed", Paul Tough shares groundbreaking research around cultivating resilience, and in one slice of the book,

describes how our ability to rationally work through problems, and make good decisions is diminished when we can't regulate our emotions. "Executive functions, as we now understand them, are a collection of higher order mental abilities, (like a team of air traffic controllers overseeing the functions of the brain. Cognitive impulse control is the ability to handle contradictory information -like a 'C' sometimes sounds like an 'S" and sometimes like a 'K'. It's a skill that is neurologically related to emotional impulse control- your ability to refrain from punching the kid who just grabbed your favorite toy car. (When this happens a child is)...using their prefrontal cortex to overcome an immediate and instinctive reaction. And whether you are utilizing self-control in the emotional realm or the cognitive realm, the ability is crucially important to getting through the school day, whether you're in kindergarten or your senior year of high school".

. The skills involved in learning to problem solve are essentially the same with social problems as with emotional ones. In young kids this might look like two children who want the same toy, or want to be first in line. Both are mad and emotions are raw. Adults can; have both children share their feelings and listen to each other, restate the problem and ask for ideas to solve it, and offer suggestions if needed. This helps kids practice coming up with solutions and makes them part of the process. Some problems seem insurmountable to kids, so helping kids break tasks into smaller segments and come up with a plan can work wonders. At school we help kids figure out whether a situation is a "big problem" or little problem". Young children will have to practice these steps repeatedly, until they can internalize the process, develop the skills, and tackle problems independently. When we teach our children to regulate emotions and resolve problems, we give them life-long tools for building resilience.

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