

Eighteen Ways to Build a Resilient Child

by Justin Coulson | @justincoulson | June 24, 2015 9:35 am

In 2014 Andrew Fuller, one of Australia's well-known child and adolescent psychologists, conducted a study about resilience with approximately 16,000 Aussie youth. The children who were most resilient almost universally agreed with two statements that children with the lowest resilience disagreed with. They were:

- I have a parent who cares about me.
- I have a parent who listens to me.

Take a moment and ask yourself, “Would my children say ‘yes’ to those two statements?” Perhaps you might even ask your child. “Do you feel like I care about you? Do you feel like I listen to you?”

What made you feel cared about as a child? When did you feel listened to? And most important, how did feeling cared about and heard make you feel?

If you are like me, it is not the big holidays or major events that built your sense of worth, and your resilience. Instead, it was the consistent, small interactions that added layer upon layer upon layer to your feelings that you were valued for who you were.

Here is a list of 18 things you might be able to do, starting today, to help your children feel cared for and heard. There is one for each year that they are a child—although they apply to all years, from day one.

1. Stop saying “I’m busy.”

There is an old quote that “To a child, LOVE is spelled T-I-M-E.” If that is the case, I can’t help but wonder what “Hurry up” might mean to a child. Or “I’m too busy right now.”

When we are too busy for our children, or when we are rushing them, they suffer. They withdraw. They miss out on opportunities to connect with us. And when they are older, our relationship with them will suffer.

2. Turn off your smartphone.

There may be no greater sign that you care, and that you will listen, than to power down your phone—or at least go to flight mode—when your children want your attention. Studies show, definitively, that the mere presence of a phone detracts from the quality of our conversations. Put the phone away when you are talking.

3. Turn off screens.

Make certain parts of the day screen-free. No TV. No tablets. No phones. Just a focus on the people in front of you. That means no texting, reading, swiping, or playing games. It means no beeps, pings, whistles, or reminders. It’s just you and your kids, and conversation. Perhaps it might be at meal time. Maybe it could be while you travel. When you decide to do it is less important than making the decision.

4. Make eye contact.

When your children want to connect and communicate with you, pause what you are doing and look them in the eyes. Physically turn towards them and pay attention to them in a way that makes it clear to them you really are right there.

5. Listen.

Sometimes our children come to us with problems. When they do, put down your tools and listen! When they tell you about a friendship drama, a challenge on the netball team, a teacher making them feel rotten, or another difficulty, ask them to tell you all about it. Listen carefully. When they are finished, ask, “What do you think you should do?” and listen again. Usually that’s enough. You don’t have to solve their problems. The answers are inside them

6. Bed time is best.

I have written previously about how to make the last ten minutes of the day a precious bonding time with your children. Try it. Our children need to go to sleep feeling secure, loved, and hopeful about the day to come.

7. Give hugs, and touch them.

In our home, we have a habit of always touching one another as we move past one another. It might be a squeeze on the arm, a stroke of the hair, a caress on the cheek, or an arm across the shoulder. The touch is an acknowledgement that you are passing a real person. It is a recognition that you have seen and noticed your child (or spouse). And it feels nice to be noticed. Plus, research shows it can boost well-being.

I also find that if a child is struggling, one of the best things we can do is hug them. In fact, the times our children deserve our hugs the least are the times they need them most.

8. Stay calm.

I once heard Steve Biddulph, a parenting author who has sold more books than nearly any other, say that a parent’s main job is to stay calmer than their child. When we stay calm, our children learn to regulate their behavior. They learn we are stable, secure, predictable, and safe. They learn that they can come to us no matter what, and we will respond calmly and kindly.

9. One-on-one time is crucial.

I have six children (and one wife!) who all want time with me. Our children feel important, heard, and worthy when they have our undivided attention. Outings, walks, and other forms of one-on-one time may be the most important way we can show our children we care about them and want to listen to them. These “dates” can be crucial relationship-builders, and we will see our relationships strengthen as we make them a priority.

10. Smile.

Let’s face it: most parents are so busy and so stressed that we do not smile as much as we might. But a smile says we can feel safe, and welcome. Our children need to see us smiling, especially at them.

11. Make time to do nothing.

When was the last time you simply sat in your living room with no agenda except to be there? Our children are most likely to talk to us when they feel conversation is welcome. If our schedule is packed so tightly we cannot even find time for a conversation with our children, we cannot make them feel cared for or listened to. Sometimes simply sitting and being available can be enough to help our children know we will listen.

12. Respond to challenging behavior with maturity.

It is common to respond to our children's challenging behavior with anger. This will invariably leave a child feeling uncared for and unheard. Sometimes we ignore our children. This has similar results. When we remember that challenging behavior comes from unmet needs, and we see that challenging behavior as a chance to get close to our children and problem-solve with them, we build our relationships rather than tear them down. Remember that discipline means teach or instruct, not hurt or punish.

13. Leave love notes.

You might shoot your child a text or Facebook message. Perhaps you could drop a note into his or her lunchbox, or pop a quick letter under his pillow. Children love getting notes from mom or dad. They feel noticed, important, acknowledged, valued.

14. Offer autonomy.

Our children feel unloved when we control them. They chafe and resist our stifling demands. While we do need to have rules and limits, our children will thrive, feeling heard and cared for, when we give them choices and allow them to decide for themselves wherever possible.

15. Get down on the floor with them and play.

Children love it when a parent lets the agenda go and flops down on the floor for some playtime. They flourish downtime with their parents where they can play, laugh and be together. Older children love wrestling too! But they respond just as well to those old-school games like Uno, Phase 10, or Skip-Bo. And they love it when we jump on the trampoline, have Nerf-gun wars, or play handball or skipping.

16. Save their presents.

There is something precious and heart warming about going back through all of the hand-made mothers or fathers day cards, birthday cards, and Christmas cards our children give us. Show them that you treasure their thoughtfulness and kind gifts. My great-grandmother kept a pottery "thing" I made on her shelf for over a decade until she passed away. I saw it every time I visited and marveled that she kept it on display. I felt like she loved me because she loved the gift.

17. Tell them you love them.

They need to hear those three words often.

18. Show them you love them.

More than the words, they need to feel you love them. Show them as much as you can. They will grow up resilient, because they will grow up feeling cared for and listened to.

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Endnotes:

1. happyfamilies.com.au: <http://happyfamilies.com.au>
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