



BUILDING RESILIENCE IN CHILDREN, FAMILIES AND CAREGIVERS:

AN EVIDENCE-BASED CLINICIANS' GUIDE

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SA-ACAPAP

Sharing Growing Leading

The South African Association for Child & Adolescent Psychiatrists and Allied Professions (SA-ACAPAP) is the national organisation of multidisciplinary professionals in child & adolescent mental health in South Africa

**Parents are not the only caregivers in a South African context. So the term 'caregiver' is used to include all parents, family members and others taking on care-giving roles.*

SA-ACAPAP strives to grow, lead and share good practice in Child and Adolescent Mental Health in South Africa. As part of those efforts, we have designed a series of short, evidence-based guidelines and resources for child and adolescent mental health practitioners in South Africa. The first was on telehealth ([click here to view/download](#)), this one focusses on building resilience.

All parents and **caregivers*** want to see their children thrive, lead happy and healthy lives and to be resilient in the face of all the challenges life will throw at them. However, not all caregivers are aware that a key component of a child's resilience is the resilience of the caregiver.

For many years, we thought that resilience was a part of someone's individual personality. Thanks to current research, we now know that resilience is not a do-it-yourself project. It is something we learn and build on with other people and groups to whom we are connected in our lives. For children, the most important group of people that make it possible for them to be resilient is their families.

The physical and mental health of caregivers is especially important. If they are healthy, they can manage crises and still care warmly for the children they parent. Resilient caregivers help children to manage stressful events and help them to develop optimally.

This document aims to sensitise clinicians to the importance of resilience in caregivers and children. It also provides practical ideas and suggestions for building resilience.

The document is divided into 3 parts:

PART 1 - What is resilience

PART 2 - Tips to build caregiver and family well-being

PART 3 - Tips to build resilience in children



WHAT IS RESILIENCE?

Resilience is the ability of a child, their caregiver and the groups they are connected to, including their family and community, to successfully manage stressful events that could be serious enough to affect normal functioning and development. Resilience is supported by different strengths found in individuals, groups and organisations. These strengths can involve individual biology (mental and physical health), individual psychology, social relationships (including support from family, friends, teachers, doctors and other service providers), institutions (for example schools) and the community as a whole.



CAREGIVER AND FAMILY WELL-BEING

Caregiver well-being is essential to child development. Most families experience stress, changes and challenges. These can have a big impact and at times be overwhelming. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic has provided a challenge with significant consequences for many families, including parents, caregivers and children. Disruptions to work, school, employment, financial situations, reduced social contact and support and grieving the loss of loved ones were stressors felt by many. Finding ways of managing stress with resilience will help caregivers live more meaningful, productive lives. It will also show children a good example of how to manage stress in positive ways.

“The single most common factor for children who develop resilience is at least one stable and committed relationship with a supportive parent, caregiver or other adult.”

Center for the Developing Child. Harvard University

Caregiver TIP 1

1

Authentic and meaningful connections

Stressful events and challenges can feel isolating. Solving problems without any support is difficult. Connecting with others brings support and encourages children to learn how to ask for the right help when they need it.

Practical examples:

Reach out to trusted people. This could include friends, family, religious community members and healthcare workers (doctors, social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists, nurses and others).



Caregiver TIP 2

2

Taking care of yourself

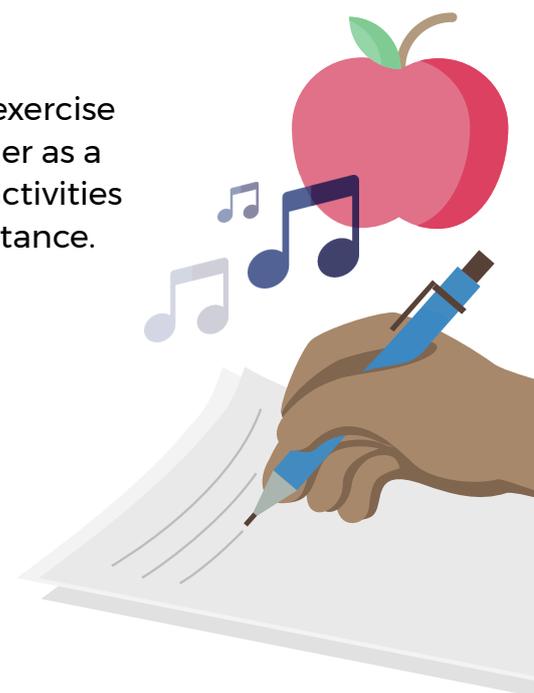
In stressful times, it can be difficult to put yourself first as a parent or caregiver. Making the choice to do things that are good for your well-being is an important strategy for managing difficult times. Seeking support for yourself is not just key for your own resilience, it will also build your own capacity to parent.

Practical examples:

Eat healthy food, get enough sleep, practise light exercise like walking and do positive and fun things together as a family. But also take a little time to participate in activities or hobbies *you* enjoy, like listening to music for instance.

Sticking to a routine can help – it reduces stress and frees up time to enjoy other activities.

Keep a journal (reflect on your worries, break them down, describe your feelings). Being aware of personal feelings and thoughts is an important starting point in dealing with stress and helps you feel more in control.



Caregiver TIP 3

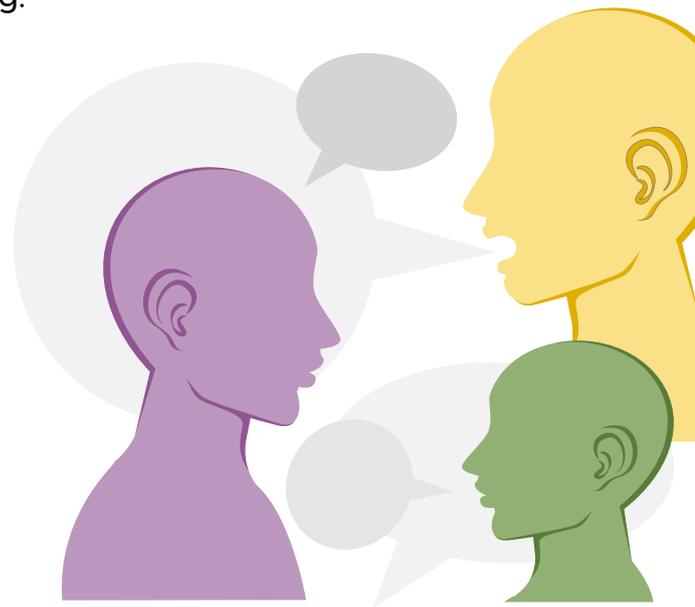
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Good communication

Good communication between family members is a great foundation for managing problems and stress. It allows problems to be discussed without unnecessary conflict and it teaches children positive ways of communicating.

Practical examples:

Discuss problems regularly within the family, actively listen to others (listen especially to the feeling behind the words being used) encourage routines that promote communication, like eating dinner together.

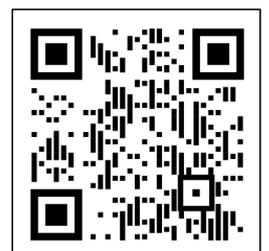


“If you want a child to be functioning well, tend to the person who’s tending the child.”

Luthar, S.S. and Eisenberg, N. (2017) Resilient adaptation among at-risk children: Harnessing science toward maximizing salutary environments. Child Development. 88, 337-349.

SCAN this QR code with any smartphone to view, download, or share these helpful CAREGIVER TIPS directly onto/from your smartphone

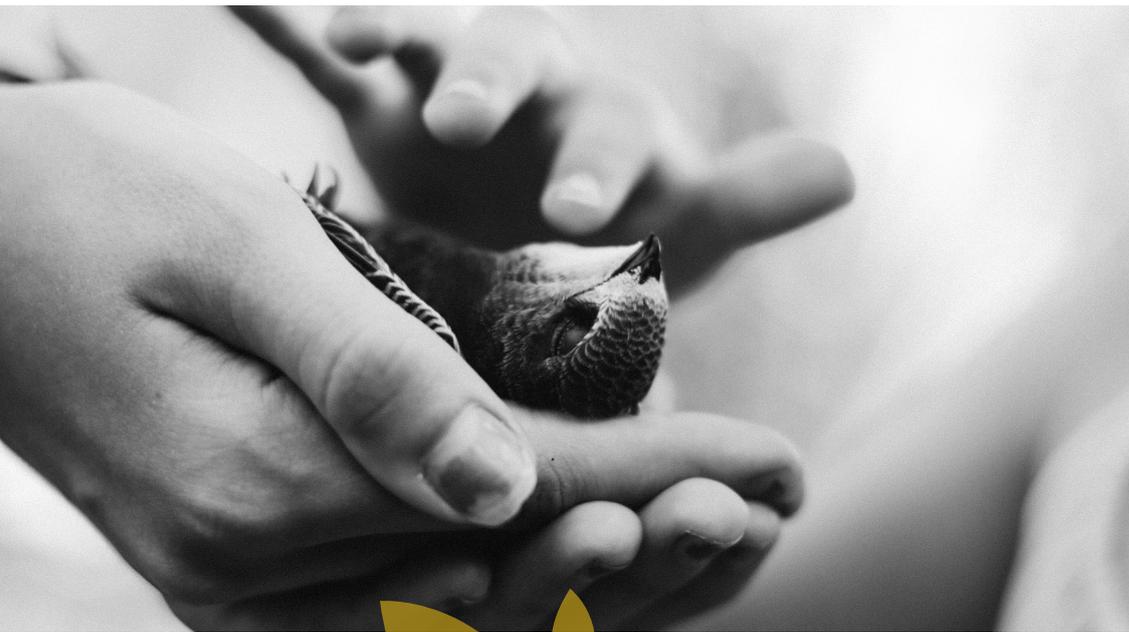
We encourage you to share these tips with other caregivers and families



RESILIENCE FOR CHILDREN

Resilience is perhaps one of the most important capacities that caregivers can help a child to build. Stress and loss also affect children, but they can learn to manage, and even thrive, when confronted with hardship. Resilience is not something that only a few children have, but a complex interaction between the child and their constantly changing home, community (for example school) and cultural environments. The most important factor to help children develop resilience, is a relationship with supportive adult caregivers in these different environments. Adult caregivers should therefore have to focus first on their own well-being using the suggestions described above.

Children can learn resilience at any age. It emerges and can become stronger over time but it does take time, commitment and practise. Here are some key, evidence-based principles and practical ideas to help build resilience in children.



“Children have never been very good at listening to their elders, but they have never failed to imitate them.”

James Baldwin (American writer and educator)

Child TIP 1

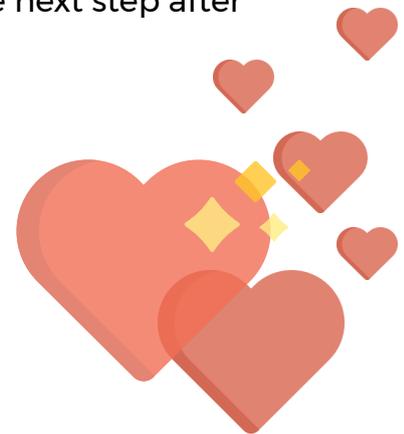
1

Stable and committed relationships with caregivers

The most important factor for children to develop resilience is to form stable and committed relationships with caregivers. Caregivers can be primary caregivers like parents, but also include relationships with other caregivers like teachers, coaches, family members, elders, etc. The more challenges a child experiences, the more important a relationship with a supportive caregiver becomes. These relationships protect children from the difficulties life throws at them. The combination of supportive relationships, adaptive skill-building (for example coaching children how to plan and solve problems) and positive experiences, form the foundation of resilience. Building other supportive adult-child relationships is the next step after building the primary adult relationship.

Practical examples:

Spending dedicated special time, even 5 minutes, with your child every day; talking to your child; listening to their worries, fears and delights; accepting them unconditionally.



Child TIP 2

2

Building a sense of self-efficacy and perceived control

Growing a feeling in children that they can change the world around them and influence events positively is important and will help develop their resilience. Giving them a sense of control, even over small areas, will allow them to gain confidence and become more independent.

Practical examples:

Help them build connections with others; help your child by having them help others; teach them self-care skills appropriate to their age (e.g. brushing their teeth, exercising, eating properly, getting enough sleep). Having fun while teaching is a great way to learn. Praise them when they solve a problem, overcome an obstacle, or make good decisions; help them set reasonable goals for themselves; listen actively to your child rather than immediately trying to solve their problems; do not protect them from all stress and adversity, but allow them, with your support, to overcome small stressors that are within their ability to manage - this balance of challenge and support allows them to thrive, and will look different at different ages.



Child TIP 3

3

Providing opportunities to strengthen adaptive skills and self-regulatory capacities

Giving children opportunities to manage their thoughts and feelings is another way of building resilience. Support them so that they can learn to regulate their emotions on their own. This changes with age but is an important skill to have throughout life.

Practical examples:

Help children identify and label their feelings and encourage ways of managing the challenging ones; encourage them to use strategies to deal with difficult feelings, for example controlled breathing, talking it through, having some alone time. Modeling your own expression of feelings and how you manage will also encourage them to use appropriate strategies; teach them to judge the level of threat in situations appropriately, for example writing a test might make your body feel as scared as when bumping into a tiger, but the test will not eat you!



Self-regulatory capacity is an ability to exert control over their thoughts, feelings and actions.

Child TIP 4

4

Enabling cultural values, faith and hope

Cultural traditions are also foundational for resilience. They give communities a shared understanding of accepted strategies in expressing loss and stress and coping with adversity. Social and moral expectations provide a sense of identity, belonging and security.

Practical examples:

Children can identify with positive role models from their community. Caregivers can model contributing to their community and having expectations of children based on good social and moral norms. Show them that you value the kind of person they are becoming, rather than how successful they are; provide family routines for everyday living and family traditions and celebrations, for example having family meals together.

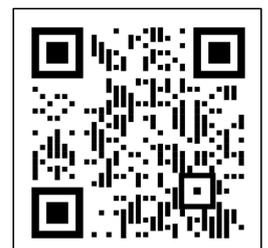


It turns out that these practical ideas to help children build resilience are also good for their optimal development, so do make the commitment to see them, and their caregivers, thrive!

A growing body of research is helping us to understand the protective systems that clinicians can leverage to improve the resilience of vulnerable children and adolescents. This guideline focussed on supportive and stable relationships with caregivers and is one of the primary support systems for our youth. Systems enabling resilience, unique to South African communities, is an important field of continued international and local study. It also enables a more detailed understanding of how to enhance resilience. The further reading section below provides additional resources which may be of use with the latest and growing research on the subject.

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FURTHER READING

Building the skills adults need for life - a guide for practitioners

<https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/resilience/>

Maximising children's resilience. American Psychological Association

<https://www.apa.org/monitor/2017/09/cover-resilience>

Positive Psychology Practitioner's toolkit

www.positivepsychologyprogram.com

Resilience Research Centre

www.resilienceresearch.org

Trauma and grief network

https://tgn.anu.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Parental-well-being_0.pdf

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