

Q & A: BUILDING PARENTAL RESILIENCE

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Question 1: What is parental resilience, and why is it particularly important for parents who are fostering or adopting?

Resilience is a person's ability to adapt successfully to challenges. Resilience is often referred to as the way we "bounce back" from a hardship, a disappointment or even a physical injury. To be resilient, you need a positive view of yourself and confidence in your strengths and abilities. Life skills such as being able to communicate clearly, problem solve and manage strong feelings and impulses are important when considering resiliency.

Parents as well as children have resilience factors. Parental resilience can be described as the ability to cope constructively and bounce back from all types of challenges that you encounter as a parent who is fostering or adopting. It is the ability to solve problems creatively, build trusting relationships, maintain a positive attitude and seek help when needed. Parental resilience is critical when you are caring for a child who has experienced trauma, separation and loss or grief. This child comes to you with greater-than-average needs and requires more support, guidance, patience, understanding and flexibility than children who have not had these experiences usually need.

Parenting a child who has experienced trauma, separation or loss or a combination of them can be difficult for you not only because of the child's challenging behaviors but also because the child's needs are not always visible to the untrained eye. Neighbors, teachers and even close relatives might see only a physically healthy child without recognizing any of the underlying needs of the child. Parents who are fostering or adopting often hear comments from others such as, "You just need to be stricter" or "They never behave that way for me" or "If that child would just learn to sit still!" Most important, you need to know that there is no magic treatment, medicine or regimen that instantly will resolve the trauma the child has experienced. Instead, it takes consistent structure, love and caring. Much of this needs to be provided by the parent who is fostering or adopting. That means it is critically important for you as a parent who is fostering or adopting to have a high level of parental resilience.

A high level of parental resilience will give you a greater ability to cope and effectively parent a child expressing challenging behaviors. Ultimately, a high level of parental resilience will help you to remain present and committed to the care of the child whom you are fostering or adopting.

Question 2: What are the building blocks of resilience for caregivers?

Resilience in both children and adults is composed of many building blocks or skills. We increase and strengthen our resilience by using different building blocks to support us during challenging times. A **sense of belonging**, **self-regulation**, a **sense of identity**, and **self-efficacy**, are essential components of resilience.

When you have a sense of belonging, you feel confident in facing challenges because you know that there are others who will support you. As you embark on this journey of parenting the child you are fostering or adopting, consider the persons who are supporting you in this venture. Do you feel stronger when you know you've got someone with whom you can talk to if you are feeling overwhelmed?

Your self-regulation skills help you to stay calm, cool and collected during times of stress. As parents who are fostering or adopting go through the home study and licensing process, they often encounter situations requiring them as caregivers to complete forms, to submit information and to participate in meetings under tight deadlines. Do you remember how you persevered under that pressure? Know that you can draw upon those skills when dealing with future events along your parenting journey.

Your sense of identity and feeling of self-efficacy also are foundations for building resilience. When you feel sure of who you are and what you can achieve, you know that you will find a way to succeed even when you encounter difficulties. Take time to reflect on your past challenges and identify your unique skills and specific traits that led to your success in meeting those challenges effectively. Asking other persons what they see in you also might help you to develop an even clearer picture of your identity and self-efficacy.

Question 3: What are some practical tips to help parents who are fostering or adopting build their resiliency?

Going through the process of becoming a parent who is fostering or adopting requires a great deal of parental resilience. You will need this type of resilience throughout your journey of parenting. Providing a safe and nurturing environment for a child who has experienced trauma, separation or loss can be very demanding. Your entire life may be affected by this journey. The impact can be positive and wonderful, but it can include challenges as well.

After reflecting on your own resilience, you can become aware of signs and symptoms indicating that you might need to seek help or added support. These can be physical, mental, emotional or behavioral signs and symptoms, such as:

- acting or feeling in ways that are out of character for you;
- feelings of anger, sadness or depression that won't go away;
- increased irritability directed toward your spouse, other family members, friends or coworkers;
- isolating yourself and avoiding being around others;
- continued feelings of hopelessness;
- overeating or not eating enough;
- lack of caring for others, and
- lacking the motivation to do things that will make you feel better

If you find yourself experiencing one or more of these behaviors or feelings, reach out for support. This could mean joining a support network, attending counseling, getting more sleep, improving your nutrition, adding more exercise to your day or finding new ways to look for positives in your life and celebrate them. Celebrate every small success. Stay focused on your relationship with the child whom you are fostering or adopting, and don't let minor issues distract you from building that relationship. If you do feel distracted by minor issues, try to identify what they are so you can learn to keep them from interfering with parenting the child. Remember that building connections with the child needs to take priority. If you have a parenting partner, make a list of each other's parenting strengths. Then discuss the responsibilities with your partner so you can divide them based on your respective strengths. Review the list after a week or two of implementing the divided duties, and determine what worked well and what needs to change.

Make sure that you have a self-care plan in place to maintain your physical, emotional and spiritual well-being. Self-care will help you maintain a balance between caring for the child you are fostering or adopting, meeting the child's needs and taking care of your own mental, physical, social and emotional needs. Self-care does not have to be complicated or take a lot of your time. It should not add stress to your life but instead should bring you joy and happiness. Spend some time identifying the activities that give you pleasure and make you happy. These might include walking the dog, knitting, listening to music, taking a drive in the country, hiking, working in the yard or even drinking a cup of tea with nobody else around. After you have identified the activities that bring you joy, sit down to figure out when and how you can fit them into your daily schedule. This might mean that you will need to give up something or make a different choice in order to fit your self-care into your already full schedule. The key is making sure that you give priority to fitting some of these self-care activities into your weekly schedule and stick with them.

In the long run, self-care will help you maintain your physical, emotional and spiritual well-being. That in turn will increase your ability to parent successfully.

Question 4: Why is it important for parents who are fostering or adopting to maintain physical, emotional and spiritual well-being?

All parents need to include self-care in their lives. However, when fostering or adopting a child who has experienced trauma, separation or loss, it is critical that you consciously schedule time for self-care that maintains your physical, emotional and spiritual well-being. Your well-being is the key to your resiliency and being able to maintain an unconditional commitment to your relationship with the child. When you are feeling run-down, depressed, frustrated or hopeless, you are far less effective as a caregiver; and the negatives will begin to pile on themselves like a snowball rolling down a mountain! This is true for any parent. Parents who are fostering or adopting have the additional tasks of building trust with children whose trust has been broken, building relationships with children who might feel that they have been

abandoned or rejected and forging attachment with children who have had negative or compromised attachments in their lives. This takes a lot of additional energy and work. Experienced parents rely on their physical, emotional and spiritual well-being to get themselves through the most difficult days.

One of our first duties as parents who are fostering or adopting is to model positive life choices and behaviors for children who might not have had good models. By modeling self-care, we not only are helping children to believe they deserve to receive good care in a loving home but also, we are helping them to develop similar positive habits. Furthermore, self-care lets a parent “keep the cup of resilience full” to have the energy, patience and ability to handle challenging situations. Parents who make sure they take time in their busy schedules to put self-care into their daily routines will have a greater ability to cope with difficult and trying situations.

Those who ignore self-care will have little energy in reserve and will struggle to provide high-quality parenting. These parents might struggle just to get through the day; so, any additional challenge or issue with a child in their care can send them over the edge emotionally. Self-care helps parents to maintain their own coping skills so they won’t find themselves angry, quick-tempered, unable to regulate their own emotions, unable to provide guidance and support or unable to solve problems and find solutions.

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