As parents, we want nothing more than for our children to grow into autonomous, responsible, happy adults capable of living authentic, purposeful lives. Our relationship with them—described by scientists as attachment—is the single most important modifiable factor that will either support or thwart them in reaching their full potential. This article explores a key way that this attachment relationship supports maturation: the development of emotional resilience.
Resilience is the ability to bounce back in the face of stress, adversity and traumatic experiences.

Nature has built resilience into all of its life forms to help us survive. We human beings, in addition to having this innate drive to survive, also have a resilience that grows and develops over time, helping us to thrive. If our children are supported in developing resilience, they will more commonly experience a sense of well-being, become more courageous, and will experience more fulfilling relationships. But most important, resilience is necessary for our kids to reach their full potential.

Resilience is best thought of as the fruit of a developmental process, rather than a fixed trait.

While it is true that we are all born with a certain organismic desire to survive, and our inborn temperament does play a role in our early capacity to function when facing stress, genes and temperament are not the primary determinants of one’s resilience. The resilience needed to thrive in this life comes from qualities and capacities that develop over a lifetime. These capacities are best thought of as developmental potentials that emerge when our children receive the proper nourishment needed for these hidden blossoms to bloom. Scientists have discovered that certain kinds of relationships and experiences activate dormant genes that then produce biochemical responses that culminate in the development of certain traits, qualities and capacities. It is through this experience-dependent maturation that our children develop emotional resilience, and our loving relationship with them is exactly the nourishment they need.

So if emotional resilience is something that is developed rather than innate, what are the conditions that optimally support this process?

Resilience develops best when our kids have:

- Secure attachments
Support for their emerging autonomy and desire for competence

Guidance through vulnerable territory by loving, confident adults who are not afraid of tears

Nothing makes us heartier than love.

Research has shown us again and again that healthy relationships can single-handedly confer resilience to human beings facing stressful and potentially traumatic circumstances. Secure attachments—those relationships where there is a consistent, warm, attuned, responsive adult—confer the greatest resilience to the developing nervous systems of our kids. Of the children who grow up in the extremes of poverty, abuse and neglect, the ones who bounce back the best and somehow beat the odds are the ones with at least one person in their life who cares for them and is available on a consistent basis. It seems we are built by design to thrive in attuned and responsive relationships. Love nourishes and buffers our hearts.

Children are like streams of water
   singing, laughing, passing
over a rocky way.

Allow them freedom for
   playing, jumping, running
And do not try to soften their stony path
   for you may no longer be near
when they pass into the violent sea.

Also, do not dam their
   splashing, gushing, rushing
For they will soon acquire much force
and attempt to break your blockage.

Bestow them their freedom for
drifting, growing, flowing
as you once desired yours.

Teach them only
of loving
and they will need no more.

—JEANNE OHM, D.C., 1972

When we help support our children’s emerging desire toward autonomy and competence, we also help them become more resilient.

Confidence arises from becoming more and more competent in the many domains of our lives: learning, problem-solving, physical activities, social interactions, and regulating our impulses and emotions, to name a few. Children need their caregivers to provide the right balance of space and support whenever the child faces a new challenge in their lives. Sometimes we will need to just sit on our hands and be silently supportive while they wrestle with a new problem. Other times they will need us to come alongside them and provide “scaffolding” for their emerging capacities in order to help them succeed. When we see our children’s faces brighten and exclaim, “I did it!” we can’t help but feel proud. With this developing sense of autonomy and confidence, our children will increasingly seek out challenges and find their way through difficult problems on their own.

A well of emotional resilience develops from a deep and sustained contact with vulnerability in the context of a safe relationship.

One of the most profound ways we can become resilient as human beings is by entering the
vulnerable territory of the human heart, feeling our “shaky tenderness” fully, and then emerging out the other side more courageous and hearty for having gone through it. This aspect of resilience is developed through what Gordon Neufeld calls the adaptive process—the process in which we are changed by those circumstances in life that we cannot change. We all come up against experiences we would rather avoid, circumstances that evoke difficult feelings like disappointment, sadness, loss and powerlessness. But it is precisely these circumstances—and more importantly our acceptance of them and the strong feelings they evoke—that allow the adaptive process to cleanse our nervous systems and develop the muscle of emotional resilience. When we allow ourselves to go from “mad to sad,” we become transformed in the most inexplicable ways. Children need their parents to recognize the healing power of tears and to lovingly and confidently guide them through these secret rivers of the human heart.

And so it is through this most important of all relationships—the intimate dance between parent and child—that the seeds of resilience are sewn. When our mere presence lights up the eyes of our loved ones, when they want nothing more than to see us grow up and become fully ourselves, we become buoyant and expand in all directions. Yes, we are vulnerable. Yes, life is hard. And yes, here we are opening out and growing anyway.
Attachment and the Development of Resilience

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Saturday, 01 March 2014 00:00 - Last Updated Friday, 15 September 2017 12:33

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