

The strengths of children and families



The strengths of children and families can help them to get through tough times.

Most children are resilient and will get through tough times. They may experience distress and disruption as the initial reaction after a traumatic experience, but they are able to utilise their strengths and supports and bounce back.

In this tipsheet, we will be talking about not only the child's own strengths that help them through traumatic and tough times, but some of the other strengths in their lives that are just as important. Children live within a family and a community and the strengths within these families and communities can really help children during the most difficult times. By understanding more about the strengths of children, families and communities, all adults can support the development of children's strengths.

The strengths of children

Children at different ages experience trauma differently and there are some experiences, such as child abuse and neglect, that significantly affect children. However, even when faced with the most difficult traumas, many children are able to get through.

There are certain individual strengths within children that help them to do this and whether you are a parent, foster carer, or another caring adult, you can help children to build these strengths. These strengths include:

- Problem solving skills and coping behaviours. Children who have good problem solving skills and who have parents or carers who praise and promote the use of these skills are generally likely to do better when faced with a traumatic experience. Children who are able to use several different strategies to cope, including not blaming themselves for what has happened, seeking support from others, expressing feelings through art or other creative ways and by talking about what has happened are also likely to be able to get through tough times.
- Ability to recognise emotions. Children who have a good knowledge of emotions, who are able to use this knowledge to talk about how they are feeling and who know that there are ways they can feel better may be able to cope more effectively.
- Ability to relate well to others. A really positive strength for children is having good social skills and being able to form supportive relationships with others. These children are able to seek support from friends, family, teachers and others in the community. Children with connections outside of the family, such as with another trusted adult or with a community or sporting group are often more resilient to the long term impact of trauma.

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The strengths of families

The family is the most important support system that is available to the child. The way that families cope with tough times can have a big influence on how well the child is able to cope.

Some of the strengths that families have that can help to protect children against the impact of trauma includes:

- Parents and carers who are tuned in to their child and can help them when they are distressed.
- Parents are carers who are informed. Families that know about the possible range of responses children have when they experience a trauma are more able to recognise when their child is experiencing difficulties and support them.
- Parents who model good coping strategies. When children see their parents or carers using positive coping strategies, such as problem solving and seeking support from others, they are more likely to feel that the challenge is not overwhelming and develop their own positive coping strategies as well.
- Families who are connected to others and have good supports. When families have strong connections with each other, with extended family members, with schools and in the community, there are more supports available to them when they experience tough times. This connectedness to social supports has been shown to help reduce the impact of traumatic events on the wellbeing of all members of the family.

What you can do now

There are a number of ways that you can help to build the strengths of your child and your family now. You can:

- Spend time together with your children, develop family routines and strong family bonds. Family routines, such as having dinner together most nights, going for walks together or having a regular movie night, help children to feel safe and secure at home. The rhythms of everyday life help children to feel more settled and that life will go on after a traumatic event.
- Encourage your child to join in sporting or community activities. Having community connections strengthens support for families. This can also help to develop children's social skills and self esteem.
- Develop and maintain a relationship with your child's school. Children spend so much time at school, that a good relationship with their school can make it easier for the school to support your child if they experience trauma.
- Talk to your children about their emotions and let them know it is normal to feel sad, angry or worried at times. Help them to understand things they can do to help themselves feel better.

Remember, if you are worried about how your child is coping after a traumatic event, seek help from the school counsellor, your GP, or another trusted health professional.

For more information visit:

www.tgn.anu.edu.au

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