



CENTER FOR THE STUDY
OF SOCIAL POLICY'S

strengthening families™

A PROTECTIVE FACTORS FRAMEWORK

Building Resilience in Troubled Times: A Guide for Parents

Families are under a kind of stress most of us have never experienced before. Maybe you felt that your family was thriving before the coronavirus pandemic. Maybe you were already struggling to pay the bills or faced other challenges. No matter where we started, our current concerns about health, income, taking care of children while schools and childcare are closed, and other stressors brought on by the pandemic means that almost all of us can use some extra support right now.

Even when times are tough, all parents have strengths they can build on with the right support. When parents thrive, they can give their children what they need to grow up healthy and safe. Strengthening Families is an approach that identifies five “protective factors,” or strengths, that all families need. Parental resilience is one of these strengths—and it’s one that is being tested and further strengthened by the challenges we all face now.

Resilience is the ability to manage your reactions to stress and to function well even when bad things happen. When you are raising children, resilience is about finding a way to be the parent you want to be, no matter what else is going on around you. Luckily, resilience isn’t something you either have or don’t have. And it’s not something you use up and lose. Rather, resilience is a skill we build throughout our lives—especially when we find ways to get through a challenge.

During these tough times, try to pay attention to what helps you calm down, tap into your own inner strength, and feel more hopeful. Here are some things that many people find help them build resilience:

- Find something you can do to take care of yourself each day, so you can take better care of everyone else who needs you. It’s okay if what makes that possible is letting your kids have some extra screen time, or having older children help out more so you can do a little less. Just carve out some time for yourself to do something you find relaxing or refreshing. Exercise, take a little longer over your cup of coffee or tea in the morning, watch your own favorite show, or talk with a friend.
- Remember that this too will pass. It’s important to hold on to a sense of hope for the future, and to believe that a better day is coming. When you are in the middle of a particularly hard day, think about what you are looking forward to when you and your children are able to do things you enjoy outside of the house, with people you love.
- Check in with each of your children to find out how they are feeling, what they are missing, or what made them laugh today. Let your child take the lead, whether you are building a block tower together or talking about their favorite YouTuber or game. We all need a reminder sometimes that we are raising



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wonderful, unique people—and that can help keep us going on the hard days too.

- Look for moments of joy and encouragement, no matter how small. Notice what people in your community are doing to help one another. Look for signs of the changing seasons, or ways you see your children growing.
- If faith is a part of your life, stay connected to your faith community. Many congregations have made opportunities for worship and study available online. Faith can be a powerful reminder to be grateful for the good things in your life, and to have hope for the future.

In the Strengthening Families framework, resilience is just one of the five “protective factors” that parents and caregivers can build. When you use the other four protective factors, you will also be building your resilience.

How you experience them may differ based on your own family, your culture, and the community you live in, but they matter for everyone. Here are some tips for how to focus on your family’s strengths and build your protective factors during these difficult times.



Social Connections: Stay connected even when you can’t be together

It’s easier to handle parenting challenges when we stay connected to the family, friends, and neighbors we have positive relationships with. Having caring people in our life helps us feel secure, confident, and empowered. Now, when we have to maintain distance to keep everyone safe and can’t go to a relative’s home or meet up with friends at the playground, we have to find ways to keep up those connections.

- Connect with the people you care about and who care about you at least once every day, even if it’s just a brief phone call, text exchange, or video chat. Aim for a longer conversation when you can.
- Help your kids do the same. Make video play dates for young children, and encourage older kids to text, call, and video chat with their friends and extended family members.
- Call neighbors to check in on them, especially those who are older, living alone, or have medical problems. During times of stress it can be very rewarding to know that you’re helping others. Children will also appreciate opportunities to help others, so include them when you can.
- Write messages in chalk for neighbors walking by, leave friendly notes by the mailboxes in your building, or participate in community activities like putting a teddy bear in your window and looking for teddy bears in other windows when you go for a walk.

Concrete Support: Get help when you need it

Even before this crisis, many families had to worry about paying the bills, having safe shelter, getting health care, and providing food and clothing for their children. Now far more people face these challenges, many for the first time. Getting what our children need, even when it means asking for help, is one of the most important things parents can do.

- Learn about the benefits and services that are available when people need help in your community. If you got this brochure from an organization in your community, they can be a great source of information about local resources. Or, you can go to <http://211.org/> or <https://helpmegrownational.org/affiliates/list/> and look for resources in your state, county, or city.
- If you are concerned about your mental health (or a loved one’s mental health), help is available. Contact your health care provider or call 2-1-1 to find out how you can access therapy over the phone or online.
- We can all be helpers. Actions as small as picking up groceries for those unable to do so for themselves can make a real difference.



- And we all need help sometimes. It can be hard to ask. Ask anyway—you'll be doing the right thing for your children.

Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development: Understand what your child needs now

Knowing what to expect as children grow up makes the job of being a parent a lot easier. Now children's regular routines have been disrupted, as childcare and schools close and families spend all days together at home, or parents have to continue to work despite the risks to their health. Learning what children need to do their best helps us guide them in a positive way.

- Daily routines are calming for both parents and children. Toddlers, for example, thrive with regular mealtimes, playtime, nap time, bath time, and bedtime. It's okay to be off schedule and a little disorganized sometimes, and then to get back to the routine when you can.
- Pay attention to your own feelings as a parent. What are your kids doing that's making you feel good? What's most frustrating to you? What do they respond well to, and what just causes more conflict? Which battles do you need to fight, and what can you let go for now? Where do you need some new strategies, and who could you turn to for help in working out those strategies?
- Even young children can experience grief. If your family has lost a loved one, or you are worried about someone who is very ill, talk to your children about how they're feeling.
- Learn about what to expect in each stage of development. Helpful resources developed by pediatricians and child development experts include:
 - ✓ For parents of infants, toddlers, and preschoolers: <https://www.zerotothree.org/parenting> or <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/actearly/milestones/>
 - ✓ All stages of development: <https://healthychildren.org/> or <https://childdevelopmentinfo.com/>

Social and Emotional Competence of Children: Build your child's emotional and relational health

As children grow, they have to learn how to manage their emotions; communicate what they are feeling and experiencing; and build healthy relationships with their peers and adults. That's harder when everyone is experiencing anxiety and stress. Some children will have greater difficulty managing their stress—and that can lead to negative behaviors like physical aggression or pulling away from loved ones. Helping children understand and express their feelings positively reduces tension now and builds communication skills they'll need throughout life.

- Young children build these skills mostly through practicing with their parents. Investing attention in them now will lead to more confident and competent kids later.
- Infants are sensitive to the stress levels of their parents and caregivers, and to disruption in their usual routines. Be as consistent and calm as you can. Talk, sing, and read to your baby and watch how they respond to you.
- Toddlers especially need lots of attention—offer as much as you can, or they're likely to get it in less positive ways. "30 hugs a day" is a great goal.
- Reading together is terrific, and it's just as good for older kids who can take turns being the reader as for younger ones who need to be read to. Older children may want to sing or dance with you or with younger children.
- Ask children what they're concerned about. Let them talk about their fears, or about missing their friends, and ask about what's going on in the world. Help them understand that their feelings are okay.

One more thing. It can be easy to be overwhelmed by advice, even good advice. Here's a really short list that you can stick on the refrigerator or save on your phone:

1. Taking care of yourself is good for you and for your kids. You can't pour from an empty cup.
2. Be kind to yourself. No one is a perfect parent, and some days will be better than others.
3. Give your kids positive attention, share moments of joy and laughter, and help them explore their own feelings. Structure is good, but so is flexibility!
4. Stay connected and help your kids stay connected to the important people in your lives.
5. Ask for help. And help others.

