Parental Resilience

Parents who can cope with the stresses of everyday life, as well as an occasional crisis, have resilience—the flexibility and inner strength to bounce back when things are not going well. Parents with resilience also know how to seek help in times of trouble. Their ability to deal with life's ups and downs serves as a model of coping behavior for their children. This can help children learn critical self-regulation and problem-solving skills (individual-level protective factors).

Multiple life stressors, such as a family history of abuse or neglect, physical and mental health problems, marital conflict, substance use, and domestic or community violence—and financial stressors, such as unemployment, financial insecurity, and homelessness—can reduce a parent's capacity to cope effectively with the typical day-to-day stresses of raising children. Conversely, community-level protective factors—such as a positive community environment and economic opportunities—enhance parental resilience.

All parents have inner strengths or resources that can serve as a foundation for building their resilience. These may include faith, flexibility, humor, communication skills, problem-solving skills, mutually supportive caring relationships, or the ability to identify and access outside resources and services when needed. All of these qualities strengthen their capacity to parent effectively, and they can be nurtured and developed through concrete skill-building activities or through supportive interactions with others.

How Workers Can Help

• Remind families that some stress is normal, and parenting is stressful for everyone. The key is how you respond to it.

• Suggest that parents keep a self-care diary to help them remember to make time for themselves each day.

• Offer to meet parents and children outside, or take a walk with them on a nice day. Emphasize the importance of fresh air and exercise in managing stress.

• Teach parents concrete strategies for relaxation. For example, guide them to take a few deep breaths and allow their body to relax while thinking of a place where they feel happy. Let them know that they can do this any time they feel uncomfortable or stressed.

How Programs Can Help

• Hire or develop staff who can form and maintain trusting relationships with families, and provide opportunities for these relationships to flourish.

• Understand that mental health consultants are an integral part of the staff team, and ensure that they are available to staff and to parents when additional support is needed.

Words to live by: Flexibility and inner strength keep families strong in times of stress.
• Train staff to observe and assess children for early signs of child or family distress and respond to children and their families with encouragement and support.

• Partner with resources in the community that help families manage stress and deal with crises, including programs that offer family-to-family help for personalized, sustained support as well as services such as mental health counseling, substance use treatment, domestic violence programs, and self-help support groups.

• Provide resources to help parents understand the causes of stress and how it affects health, relationships, and family life.

• Teach parents concrete skills to prevent stress, such as planning and goal setting, anticipating difficulties, problem-solving, communication, and self-care.

• Link parents with resources for stress management, such as exercise opportunities, relaxation techniques, and venues for meditation or prayer.

CBCAP State Example: Maryland Family Network

Maryland Family Network and Maryland’s Family Support Centers work in partnership with parents to build parental resilience through community-based, self-sufficiency programming. Increasing parents’ education and training is one way to increase resilience by helping parents qualify for higher-paying jobs. Parents with more education also are more likely to engage in healthy behaviors and lifestyles for themselves and their children.

Educational services include both adult education (for learners at all levels) and family literacy. Programs for adults offer revolving, open-ended enrollment. Services are nonthreatening and self-paced, provide daily successes, promote esteem building, and are highly individualized. Family literacy activities include adult literacy and education, parent-child activities focusing on literacy, parent education to maximize their role as their child’s first teacher, and developmentally appropriate child care.

Employment readiness services aid participants in planning for, securing, and maintaining employment. These services include group workshops, individual sessions, panel discussions, presentations by guest speakers, field trips, and video taping of mock interviews. Assessments of career interests, values, and skills are provided, and job readiness counseling helps to enhance skills in areas such as coping with anger and conflict, time management, stress management, working as a team member, effective communication, and selecting quality child care.

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