



# Building Resilient Children, One Story at a Time

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## Kids Need Connections is not only the name of SCAN's current child abuse prevention campaign, but it is a fact.

In order for kids to thrive, they need to have meaningful connections with their family, peers, neighbors, school, and community.

At the same time, adults in the community need to be connected with kids. Adults need to foster positive connections.

These connections are critical to keeping children safe and nurturing their growth and development.

When a child has influential people in their lives then they are better equipped to handle adversity and are able to maneuver through life's hurdles (Alvord and Grados, 2005).

*“The worth of a book  
is to be measured by  
what you can carry  
away from it.”*

*- JAMES BRYCE*

## RESILIENCY

Even in the face of adversity, some children are able to show resiliency, the ability to “bounce back.” How do they become resilient? If a child's basic psychological and physical needs are met, then they are more likely to develop the ability to be resilient. However, if those needs are not met, then each adverse event in their lives can make them less resilient and more likely to succumb to the pressures of chronic stress and high anxiety (Richaud, 2013).

A child needs a balance of inner strengths (such as positive social relationships, the proper ability to process thoughts and skills, as well as the ability to self-regulate their emotions) and beneficial external influences (such as competent caregivers at all levels, friendships, support networks and effective schooling) to be resilient (Richaud, 2013).

According to Bruce D. Perry, MD, PhD (2006), there are four key areas that affect a child's ability to be resilient;

- 1. Temperament, even at birth.** Is the baby easy to comfort or extremely sensitive? Connecting with our children begins in the womb.
- 2. Attuned Caregiving.** Are you or any caregiver to the child, calm or anxious? Engaging or isolated? Being anxious and/or isolated can greatly affect a child's resiliency.
- 3. Healthy Attachments.** Children need to have connections. Are there multiple people in their lives who care for them and that are actively involved?
- 4. Opportunities for Practice.** Does your child have many chances to interact with others and explore the world around them?

**The good news is that resiliency can be taught** (Gorman, Dale, Grossman, Klarreich, McDowell, Whitaker, 2005). You can build a child's resiliency by honing in on a talent, finding a champion who believes in them unconditionally, helping a child look within and use the skills they already have, teaching a child to be their own recruiter and asking for help from peers and adults when they need it, and imparting the importance of helping others. Taking the time to connect with children and invest in them at a young age will greatly increase their ability to bounce back when they are faced with adversity.

## BUILDING RESILIENT CHILDREN THROUGH THE USE OF STORIES

A great way for a child to experience connections is through the use of books. Children delight in the ability to lose themselves and connect with the lives of storybook characters and places. Children between the ages of four and eight are especially likely to choose stories that focus on people rather than stories that focus on objects. They desire stories that are socially and mentally complex enough that they stimulate their imaginations (Barnes and Bloom, 2013). Books are a great way to connect with a child and they allow a child to connect with themselves. Through books, children can feel empowered not only to make the most out of their lives, but also to help others.

**When you are using books to connect with children, you should purposefully use resiliency building stories to read with them** (Petty, 2012). The stories can become the springboard to use when diving into the challenges that children face in their young lives. Books you choose should have problem solving messages, appeal, be developmentally appropriate, readily available, and have a

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relatable story plot and characters (Petty, 2012). The stories should be fun and memorable, engaging and imaginative, and stories in which everyone (even the adult) can learn something (Sweeney, 2001). Children need to learn from the stories “to live not just from moment to moment but with an understanding of how problems come about and how new challenges might unfold in the future” (Sweeney, 2001).

Simply reading a story with a child is not enough. Children must be guided to view stories as a means for determining their own place in the world and how everyone's actions can have short or long term impacts (Sweeney, 2001). It is important to ask open ended questions about the situations that the characters are in and the emotions that they are experiencing. Relate the story to experiences that the child has had in their own life or perhaps has witnessed. This allows children to practice social skills that they are learning in every aspect of their life.

There are other strategies you can use to engage your child while reading these resiliency stories. Before you even open to the first page, identify the spine, front cover, and back cover of the book. Point out the author and illustrator and talk about what their part was in creating the story. They may begin to recognize names and connect the story with others written or illustrated by the same person. Show them the picture on the cover of the story and ask them to predict what the story will be about. As you are reading, give a different “voice” to the characters and read with expression. If your child is a beginning reader, point to the words as you read or use a guide. Have them identify words that they

know. Before you turn the page, ask the child what they think will happen next. At the end of the story, have the child summarize what happened.

## WHO SHOULD USE THESE STORIES?

Resiliency stories can be used in a variety of settings. They can be bedtime stories read at home between children and their parents, grandparents, and caregivers or they can be stories that tie in with Sunday School lessons. Child care facilities and after school programs can use these stories to develop early literacy skills and create hands on activities that allow a child to delve deeper into the story.

*Resiliency stories can be used in so many settings. They can be bedtime stories, or stories that tie in with Sunday School lessons, or stories to develop early literacy skills at school.*

And, these stories can be used in a school setting. Schools can be a magical place for children. They should provide the opportunity to make friends; develop learning competencies; and experience relationships with teachers that are caring and non-judgemental. They should be a place of safety and stability, where positive interactions can occur on a daily basis and where children can feel successful (Richaud, 2013). It is also a natural place to be exposed to stories that build resiliency. With a little help from the librarian, a teacher can infuse resiliency building stories into their curriculum.

**The school environment builds resiliency in children by providing developmental opportunities as well as emotional, motivational, and strategic supports.** Schools also have the ability to intervene in a child's life and address the risk factors that they face. Schools are instrumental in

developing strong school-family connections (Morrison and Allen, 2007). Through learner-centered practices, relevant curriculum, the ability to meaningfully contribute to the classroom, opportunities for intrinsic motivation, problem-solving, encouragement, communicating high expectations, and a chance to build social and emotional skills, the classroom is a perfect place to build resiliency (Morrison & Allen, 2007).

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*“It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men.”*

- FREDERICK DOUGLASS

## CALLS TO ACTION

*Try these six steps to help build resiliency in the children in your life (Alvord & Grados, 2005).*

**1 Teach a child to be an active participant in their life.** Children need to learn that they matter and what they say and do will have an impact not only on their life but on the lives of others. This gives them hope for their future and boosts their confidence.

**2 Teach a child how to regulate their emotions.** Children should always be attuned to their emotions but they also need to learn to self-regulate their emotions. When they are upset, they need to be able to calm themselves. When they are angry, they need to be able to keep their anger under control and not act out. The ability to self-regulate will improve their peer relationships as well as increase their adaptability in any situation. Many times, this means modeling the desired behavior for the child. Demonstrate to a child how to take deep breaths, count to 10 in their head, and other non-violent ways to express their frustrations in effective and acceptable ways.

**3 A child needs at least one caregiver in their life who loves them unconditionally, who sets firm limits and healthy boundaries, and is responsive to their needs.** Make sure to listen to the child. What are they really saying? Give them your full attention. Establish boundaries that allow a child to learn independence but that do not allow them to engage in unhealthy choices (too much screen time, eating too many unhealthy snacks, not getting adequate sleep).

**4 Be a connection for a child.** Children need many people in their lives with whom they can connect and form healthy attachments. It is through these connections that children develop a sense of belonging; their self-esteem is increased as is their self-worth. It is equally important for children to realize the give and take of these relationships and they need to learn how to reciprocate the social support and positive aspects of these connections.

**5 Establish a positive school–family relationship.** Having a positive attitude toward school, teachers, and education in general gives a child a huge advantage and increases their ability to be resilient. Conversely, teachers and school staff need to encourage children and provide opportunities for them to develop skills and extra-curricular interests. Caregivers should play an active role in the school–family relationship through asking questions of the child and teacher, assisting the child in follow through with homework, getting involved as much as possible with activities at the school, showing interest in the child’s school work and projects, and reinforcing the academic skills that the child is learning.

**6 Involve your child in their community.** Children should learn what resources are available to them in the community as well as what a resource they can be to the community. Teach your child where the nearest community services are located (such as rec centers, schools, health services, fire and safety buildings, and even religious organizations). Also teach your children who the trusted adults are within the community as well as within your own neighborhood. Don’t live in isolation. Teach a child who to go to when they need help.

SCAN has developed our own series, *Children’s Books that Build Resiliency*. It includes 15 popular children’s stories that are in line with our Calls to Action. Each story has its own questions that you can ask a child when you have finished reading the book. There are additional enrichment activities you will find on our Pinterest page to extend the story.

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