

How to nurture resilience in children with SEN

We all want our children to be happy. But Dr Becky Kennedy¹ argues nurturing resilience is more important than ensuring happiness. We need to help children cope with a full range of emotions and not just brush away difficult feelings; this is because brushing away difficult feelings makes the child associate these feelings with fear and something difficult to tolerate. One of our jobs as parents is to help children learn to tolerate and regulate the full range of emotions. This requires resilience and it's especially important for children with SEN.

So how do we nurture resilience in children? Here are my top tips...

1. Accept all feelings.

Children with SEN are likely to have more emotional upheaval than most. When they find themselves experiencing any sort of distress, it's tempting to contradict all those uncomfortable feelings and make them go away - we don't want to engage with these difficult feelings of inadequacy and shame so we brush them under the carpet or deflect. But these feelings are their truth in that moment; denying these feelings makes them something to fear, to be ashamed of and disempowers them; a denial of these feelings can feel like a rejection of them and who they are. Let them sit with those feelings and accept them for a while so they're not scared of them. Support them in being able to tolerate it. Try this:

I can hear how upset you are. I want to understand - tell me more.

This invites more conversation and processing of these feelings. It also shows your child that it's ok to have these feelings, it's ok to *be* them, they don't have to 'reject' themselves. Being different, feeling different is difficult but you still love them; instead of being rejected, they feel accepted and better understood; they feel stronger. By understanding more, you also have the opportunity to empathise and build more trust between you.

I believe you - I can see how strongly you feel that.

¹ Kennedy, B., 2022. *Good inside: A practical guide to becoming the parent you want to be*. HarperCollins.

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Even if you don't fully believe what they are saying about themselves or a situation, it is their truth in that moment and we don't want to damage that self-belief by rejecting their truth. If we tell them they are wrong, we are telling them that they can't trust themselves - allow their feelings to be true in that moment. This way of talking helps them believe in themselves in the moment and more fundamentally. Our job is to hear that and help them reframe

2. Model the internal self-talk to help them self-regulate.

What do you want *them* to say to themselves when things feel tough? We can help shape the way they talk to themselves in how we regulate our own emotions when stressed. When *you* are frustrated, how do you model how to process that frustration and regulate your emotions?

"Come on Charlotte, you can do this."

"Ok, this is tough and I can feel myself getting really cross/stressed. I'm going to step away for a moment."

Notice that this doesn't deny or suppress the feelings; it's accepting and processing them. This soothing self-talk allows you to tolerate the feeling and work through it without blocking or rejecting it completely. Developing this tolerance to feelings builds wider resilience.

3. Build in a 'wait' button for when they want to give up.

As tempting and natural as it might feel, don't rush in to try and take away your child's struggles or negative feelings. Instead, be with them through it. If it's difficult homework, don't just do it for them; try to show them the steps to get there themselves or prompt them with questions. Tell them it's ok not to get it yet but trust it will click eventually - sometimes we just have to pause and be patient until that moment comes.

OK, I'll sit with you to figure this out; take a break if you need, but I want you to feel the satisfaction of working it out yourself when you're ready. Hold on, be patient with yourself; you will find the way in time.

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A lot of schools promote a growth mindset where they cultivate a sense of acceptance in not understanding something yet and adopting this mindset requires patience and resilience. But when they feel that (supported) struggle and then the success that follows, what their body learns is not to look around for someone to take it away (because of fear, vulnerability etc) but to pause, wait for the fog to clear and find a way forward for themselves. This is incredibly empowering and can be cultivated through these supportive and validating conversations.

Good luck,
Charlotte 😊