

ILONA BONIWELL ON FAMILY

Anxiety and mental health disorders are on the up in children and adolescents, but if we can teach them how to be resilient, they have a better chance of bouncing back, no matter what life throws at them

“Try to build your children’s resilience”

Arise in mental health disorders in children is hardly surprising, considering the challenges modern adolescents face; parental job insecurity, divorce, and exam pressure. Mental health problems are increasingly common, but there is one thing you can do – try to build up your kids’ resilience.

Resilience can be described as an ability to be in control of the way we respond to situations and to bounce back from adversities. Not limited to big life events, resilience is extremely helpful in everyday life, when we are faced with hundreds of different stressors, even seemingly small things, like someone losing their nerve, or the internet crashing at the exact moment you need to send that email, or friendships crossing privacy boundaries on social networking sites. Resilient children keep studying even after receiving a bad mark on a test. Even more importantly, children who are resilient have a much better chance of not falling victim to anxiety and depression. Sounds good, but how do we develop resilience?

It’s not easy, as there are a multitude of factors that affect it, ranging from establishing a strong social support, to having a positive sense of self, finding meaning in a dramatic life event, or experiencing more positive emotions. Yet, there is one strategy that consistently gets high success scores – and that’s challenging the way we interpret events. You see, what we usually take as a causal link (something bad happened, therefore I feel bad) is actually more complex and is influenced by the way we perceive or interpret the

original event (something happened, I perceive it as negative, therefore I feel bad).

Imagine you walk past a group of colleagues who start laughing as you pass by. How do you feel? It depends on how you interpret their laughter. If you think they’re laughing at you, you won’t walk away smiling. If you think they’re sharing a joke, you may feel happy for them. The way you perceive this event will influence your feelings. Psychologists can help you capture the different ways you explain various events, identifying your ‘attributional style’ and its dimensions, and helping you challenge your explanations when they’re inappropriate. This process can help break a negative cycle that leads to depression and anxiety.

Which parrot are you?

However, the mechanics of attributional style are sometimes too intricate to explain to children. Luckily, there is an easier way to go, using metaphorical images that appeal more easily to children. Imagine your perception as a parrot sitting on your shoulder, telling you what to think and how to interpret each different life situation you come across. These parrots come in different sizes, shapes and colours, falling into six predictable patterns. You (and your kids) may have one, two or more in your personal aviary. So, let’s meet the parrots:

The Blamer is a red parrot who spends its time blaming other people for the situation (‘It’s all their fault’). It looks bullish and puffed up, and it often feels angry.

The Judge is a black and white, uptight-looking parrot, who is concerned with what is fair and what is right (or not). It



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likes telling people what they should or shouldn’t do, and gets upset, angry or sulky when it thinks fairness is not happening.

The Loser is a small, grey parrot who believes everyone else is better at specific things or in particular situations. It doesn’t like putting itself forward and doesn’t feel it measures up against others. It says, ‘I’m useless’ and ‘I don’t measure up’, and can feel sadness, embarrassment and depression.

The Worrier This blue parrot is concerned with the future and how a present situation might turn out badly (‘It’s going to go wrong’). At its worst, The Worrier can catastrophise things, experiencing anxiety, fear and nervousness.

The Faulty, a purple parrot, believes any situation is its fault and can spend a lot of time and energy blaming itself, feeling guilt, shame, worry and anxiety. It can ruminate over a problem for a long time, which increases these feelings.

The Whatever is a typical teenage parrot. Sometimes a blind optimist, who believes it will all come right in the end, and sometimes a ‘dropout’, who doesn’t care how it turns out,

it often feels disengaged and uses language such as, ‘So what?’, ‘Whatever’ and ‘As if I care’.

Identifying these parrots may help you and your children to challenge your interpretation of life situations and to think more objectively. Kids ‘get’ these characters easily; you might find them shouting, ‘Mum, it’s your Judge parrot talking again!’

GOT A QUESTION FOR ILONA? Email ilona@psychologies.co.uk, with ‘ILONA’ in the subject line

Read *The Resilience Factor* by Karen Reivich and Andrew Shatté (Broadway Books, £9.25)

See Ilona’s TEDx talk Educating for Happiness and Resilience: tedxtalks.ted.com/video/Educating-For-Happiness-and-Res

Visit positran.fr/what-we-do-services/topics/building-resilience-in-children

Event Ilona will be speaking in London on 6 March 2014. For more information, see happierworld.eventbrite.co.uk