Managing life’s ups and downs

Children need to develop resilience and healthy coping skills to deal with life’s ups and downs. Life’s downs may include emotionally painful experiences such as feeling loss, rejection, disappointment or humiliation. It takes time and a lot of practice to develop any skill and learning coping skills to manage life’s ups and downs is no exception.

Resilience and coping skills

While children can be negatively affected by events in their lives, they can also grow up with the ability to cope with life’s demands, such as having a job and building relationships. This ability is called resilience and all children can benefit from this.

The resilience skills that children are developing can be organised into the following three categories 1.


I AM

This is about children believing in themselves and knowing that they are loveable and likeable people. Children can learn to feel good about themselves when parents and carers:

- tell them they love them and show their love (e.g., hugging them)
- wanting to be with them (e.g., having fun and playing with them every day)
- listen to them and talk to them
- develop trust with their child by not letting them down
- help them learn to manage their feelings
- help them learn how to relate well to others
- don’t criticise them or put them down, but notice the good things about them and give them appreciation, encouragement and praise.

Below are some useful coping skills for managing life’s ups and downs. Young toddlers may not yet be developmentally able to learn many of these skills, so parents and carers can also model these over time.

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<th>Coping behaviours</th>
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<td>Feeling in control of your responses and feelings</td>
<td>Having strategies to help you feel better</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thinking positively</td>
<td>Understanding how negative experiences make you feel</td>
<td>Having the ability to keep trying and not give up</td>
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<td>Problem solving</td>
<td>Feeling confident to ask for help</td>
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<td>Making the best of what you have</td>
<td>Feeling good about yourself.</td>
<td>Accepting what you cannot change</td>
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<td>Knowing that upsetting feelings are temporary</td>
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Information for families and early childhood staff   Component 2 - Developing children’s social and emotional skills
I HAVE

This is about children knowing they belong somewhere, have a place in the world and have people around to support them.

Children learn to feel they belong when they have:

- a family that welcomes and claims them (e.g., by celebrating their birthdays, celebrating their first day at the early childhood service, giving them some say in what happens)
- grandparents and/or other relatives who love them, care for them and want to be with them
- early childhood staff who care about them, look forward to greeting them each day, and look out for them
- a home they know they can go to sleep in every night, warm clothes, enough to eat and a place to play
- health care and education
- adults who respect and show care for each other
- predictability at home (e.g., knowing when meals are, who will be there, how parents and others will react to what they do)
- a group of friends to belong to
- confidence and faith in morality and goodness, which might be expressed by belonging to a church or religious group.

I CAN

This is about children feeling capable and able to do things for themselves.

Children learn to feel competent when adults:

- listen to their ideas seriously
- give them opportunities to do things for themselves
- encourage them to try things, show you are pleased about their ideas and give them a hand when needed
- notice their interests and help them by providing support (e.g., for hobbies and activities)
- let the child help an adult; it will help them feel needed (e.g., toddlers can sweep, carry a parcel, open a door)
- teach them how to solve problems and how to get help if they need it.

Supporting children to deal with everyday stress develops their coping skills

Children develop their coping skills through exposure to a manageable amount of stress, for example, the everyday challenges that children face. Stress is our bodies’ reaction to feeling threatened or afraid. It makes us either alert and prepared to run away or ready to face the threat and do something to help us feel better.

For a newborn everything is new and stressful, even a nappy change. When parents and carers are gentle and nurturing in everything they do, their baby learns to feel safe in new situations and to trust their carers to look after them. For older babies and young children there are other everyday challenges, such as meeting new people or being separated from the adults they trust. Children learn coping skills by overcoming these small stresses; this helps them to cope with all the challenges they will meet.

Too much stress affects children’s learning, behaviour, physical and mental health. Children who have many sad, stressful and fearful times when they are young have a greater need for early support in order to buffer these negative effects and build their coping skills.
Coping skills reduce stress and enhance mental health and wellbeing.

Children develop coping skills with adult support

While some children have a positive outlook on life, others may interpret experiences with negative thoughts, feelings or behaviours. Children’s thoughts affect the way they cope, so adults need to help them to look at life positively. For example, a child might interpret being left out of a group in the playground as ‘They don’t like me. I am not worth liking. I am not a nice person’. An adult can help a child to change their thoughts by reminding them of times they have played happily with others, so they have good memories to call on.

What we think about children and how we talk about them to others in front of them also impacts on how they see themselves.

The table describes some ways adults can support children to rethink their negative thoughts, feelings and behaviours to build coping skills.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The child’s negative thoughts and actions</th>
<th>Unhelpful responses from adults</th>
<th>Putting it positively and building optimism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘I can’t. I will never be able to do it.’</td>
<td>‘You’re just not trying.’</td>
<td>‘I know you can’t do it yet, but you can get there. Last week you learned to do a very hard puzzle.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘I’m scared.’</td>
<td>‘Don’t be a such a scaredy cat.’</td>
<td>‘It is a big slide. Would you like me to come with you the first time?’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘It’s too hard.’</td>
<td>‘You’re just lazy.’</td>
<td>‘It is a big job. Let’s just do the first bit and see how that works. I will help you get started.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaves a mess</td>
<td>‘Your room is a pigsty. Why can’t you be clean?’</td>
<td>‘It looks like this room needs some help to be cleaned.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fights over a toy</td>
<td>‘Give it to me. You two are always fighting. If you can’t play properly no one can have it.’</td>
<td>‘Let’s find out what you both want and see if we can sort this out.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Makes too much noise</td>
<td>‘Stop that terrible racket. You are giving me a headache.’</td>
<td>‘That’s too much noise for inside the house. Would you like to play outside or do something different?’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Helping children learn from what you do

Children learn how people behave in the world by watching the people they love. It is helpful to be open about your feelings and thoughts when things go wrong for you and to answer children’s questions honestly. This helps the child to learn how to manage feelings when things go wrong and look for other ways to solve problems. For example:

**Loss**

‘I am crying because I am sad that grandma has died. We had lots of good times together and I am sad that she won’t be here anymore.’

‘It makes me feel better when I put some flowers on grandma’s grave and I think about how she loved her garden. I might plant some of her favourite flowers to remind me of the good times with her.’

**Disappointment**

‘Oh dear, I did want to have a night out with daddy tonight, and now he has to work late. I feel really disappointed ... well I guess we can go out on another night. Maybe you and I can have a special dinner at home. We can save some for daddy when he gets home later.’

**Frustration**

‘I can’t find the car keys and we will be late. I will just sit down for a minute and think where they might be, then I can look carefully in all the places. Being a bit late will not be too bad, we will still have enough time to do what we want to.’

**Conflict**

‘Mummy and I were both angry. We both wanted something different and we couldn’t get anywhere talking about it. So we waited a while and talked about it again when we were not angry. We found a solution that was not exactly what either of us wanted but we think it will work.’

For younger children, when they see their parents angry, make sure they also see you make up and give each other a hug.

**Change**

‘I really don’t want to move house but there are some good things about our new place, we can all go and see what we can find and I will invite my old friends over to visit soon.’

Helping children deal with frustration

For children, the everyday ups and downs of life include frequent frustration and compromise. How you talk about hard things depends on the child’s age and understanding and how much they want to know. When you talk about hard things, wait for your child’s response. Children often need to take things in small bits, not big chunks of information all at once. When you see your child has had enough, wait for another time.

The toddler years especially are a time when young children experience lots of frustrations, such as not being able to do what they want and adults not understanding what they are saying. As children get older they experience different frustrations, for example when they try new things such as beginning reading.

Some things adults can do to help children deal with frustration are:

- Listen to children and let them know you understand and are trying to see things from their point of view, especially if they are getting upset. It can be helpful to talk to children when things are going wrong and they are getting frustrated. For example, ‘That looks pretty tough’ or ‘I’m sorry I didn’t hear you right, let’s try again. Shall I guess and you tell me if I am right or wrong?’

- If children are really upset or having a tantrum, stay near until they are calmer. If the tantrum is because you have stopped children from something they wanted to do, help them find something else after the tantrum is over.

- If the child is old enough, ask them what they think they could try or what they think would help. Younger children may benefit from having some suggestions to choose from.

- Break the task down into smaller, more manageable chunks so the child can experience some success and stay motivated to keep trying. Observe and listen to how children might show or describe how they are feeling.

- Suggest the child takes a break for a while or engage them in a calming activity.

- Remind children of what they do well. Frustration is easier to manage in a context of general success.

- Acknowledge children’s efforts in managing their frustration (e.g., ‘You managed well when your building fell down, you tried another way to make it work; that is really good thinking’).
Helping children to deal with disappointment

Children learn the skills they need to be able to cope with disappointments by experiencing and dealing with everyday setbacks. From this they can learn that disappointments can be coped with and that there are other good things that can happen.

Children who learn to manage disappointment, calm themselves and move forward, are happier and more able to achieve their goals than those whose coping skills are not as well developed.

To support children in dealing with disappointment, parents and carers can:

» Stay with the child and hold and comfort them. Remember that small disappointments for adults can feel very big for a child.

» Listen and show you understand how the child is feeling. Encourage them to talk about what it means to them and what the worst thing about it is.

» After listening to the child you could ask what they think would help or what they want to do. Give some suggestions if needed and be available to help if they would like you to.

» Learning to lose is one of the hardest things for children. Having experiences of success helps children to cope with losing. They know that they do not always lose and are happier to let someone else have a win too. Some ways in which you can help children to have experiences of success and loss include playing games of chance with them, such as Snap, and making sure tasks are not too hard.

Helping children cope with change

Changes, even when positive, can involve some losses. Adults and older children have more experience of change so they have some knowledge and skills to help them cope, but change can be scary for young children who don’t know what to expect.

» Babies’ lives are full of change; parents and carers can help them cope by protecting them from too many changes at once and being with them during changes—holding them gently and talking to them about what is happening.

» Toddlers live in a rapidly changing world. They are learning to be independent, and to move around on their own feet—this can be both exciting and scary for them. Toddlers have a strong need to be independent but still do not understand enough about the world to feel safe in it. Toddlers often deal with this by wanting to stick to routines they know, for example, they may insist on the same food or bedtime story. Parents can help toddlers deal with change by allowing them to accept change at their own pace, letting them keep their usual routines, watching over their new ventures and being there for comfort when they need reassurance.

» Preschoolers have more resources to draw on than younger infants as they know more about the world and are more able to say how they feel. Parents and carers can give children confidence by reminding them of their strengths and listening to their fears. Even so, there are many times when a preschooler cannot cope with change and needs support and comfort from parents and carers.

» One of the biggest changes toddlers and preschoolers are likely to face is having a new baby in the family. Parents and carers can tell them about all the positive things that will happen for them, such as having a new playmate when the baby is older and they are loved just as much as ever.

Helping children cope with conflict

We see lots of conflict when two-year-olds play together as they are not easily able to see the world from other people’s points of view.

There are a few simple things parents and carers can do to help young children deal with conflict. If the child is very upset or disruptive, take them away from the situation to be with you until they feel more able to cope. Let the child know that you understand that they feel upset and you could say how you think they feel if they are too young to do so themselves. If necessary, remind them we show feelings with words and not by being aggressive, such as by hitting, kicking or biting. Stay with the child and let them know you are there to help them.

For older children, you might ask them for their ideas about what might solve the problem. For younger children you could make some suggestions for them to choose from. If necessary, take charge and decide what needs to be done, and explain to the children why you are taking these actions. For example, ‘I can see you can’t share the bike right now. Let’s make pretend cars for you both to play with, let’s go and find the cardboard and paint’.

Parents and carers can give children confidence by reminding them of their strengths.
Four-year-old Sarah was playing with friends in the kitchen when her mother had gone into the bedroom for a moment. While playing, the kitchen tablecloth was tugged, and a plate fell onto the ground and was broken. Sarah and her friends hid the broken plate in the kitchen bin. Later, when Sarah's mother saw the broken plate in the bin, she felt angry and asked Sarah what had happened. Sarah wasn't sure what to say, so didn't answer her mother. This made Sarah's mother angry and Sarah then began to cry. Sarah's mother tried to calm herself by taking deep breaths and tried to reconnect with Sarah by hugging her. Sarah wasn’t ready to reconnect and pulled away, so her mother said ‘I'd like to hug you when you’re ready.’ Later, Sarah came to her mother and said she was sorry for hiding the plate and that she was upset she had broken it. As they shared a hug, Sarah’s mother reminded herself about the importance of hearing children’s feelings and being in touch with her own feelings.

Reconnecting when things go wrong is an important coping skill children can learn from supportive adults. It helps children to know bad feelings are temporary and that they will feel better. Reconnecting with loving parents reaffirms children's sense of safety and enables them to move on.

A positive outlook on life improves children’s wellbeing. Optimistic children believe they can help themselves or get help when things go wrong, they expect most things will turn out well. With confidence, a sense of optimism, and helpful thinking, children are better able to cope with life’s ups and downs. Some examples of helpful and unhelpful thinking are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Helpful thinking</th>
<th>Unhelpful thinking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Down times are short term and will change.</td>
<td>Down times last forever and won’t change.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘I had no one to play with today, but I will find someone tomorrow.’</td>
<td>‘I had no one to play with today, nobody ever plays with me.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mostly things go well.</td>
<td>Mostly things go badly.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘I usually have lots of fun at preschool.’</td>
<td>‘We never do anything interesting at preschool.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If you get something wrong there will be lots of times to get things right.</td>
<td>If you get something wrong, you will fail at everything.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘I could not climb the wall, but I am good at running and throwing balls.’</td>
<td>‘I could not climb the wall, I can’t do anything right.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Things can go wrong for lots of reasons.</td>
<td>If you get something wrong it is your fault.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘My painting was spoiled because the paint was too runny.’</td>
<td>‘My painting was spoiled, I am hopeless at painting.’</td>
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Optimism helps children cope when things go wrong
Feeling good is a key part of mental health and wellbeing

Making happy times

The happy times you have with children are the building blocks of their self-esteem and good mental health. It can be a good idea to think about all the happy interactions you have had with children in a day, and all the ones where you have been angry and had to say ‘no’, or have not had time to answer them. If there are more negative interactions than positive ones, it is important to think about what is happening in your life and how you could make it less stressful. Often the reason children miss out on good times is because their parents or carers are stressed. It is important to make time to have fun and take care of yourself.

- For some parents and carers, making a conscious decision to do one fun thing every day with their children helps them build this into their busy lifestyle. It’s great if this is something you know your child loves to do: an outing to a park, fun with bubbles or a ball in the backyard, cooking or visiting a friend. Even if it is for 15 minutes, the main thing is that they are having fun with you.

- Good feelings arise when a child gets a special smile or a word of encouragement for what they are doing, for example, singing something together as you go somewhere in the car, a gentle touch or a hug. Little things like this, done often, are important to children’s self-esteem and confidence.

- Let your child help you sometimes with what you are doing. It may take longer but children love to help you and do things with you.

- Think back on your own childhood and what your happiest memories were. Things may be different now but all children need happy times with parents.

... a child requires progressively more complex joint activity (interactions) with one or more adults who have an emotional relationship with the child. Somebody’s got to be crazy about this kid. That’s number one. First, last and always.

When fun goes too far

Sometimes fun gets out of hand and may end up in tears or someone being hurt. Young children can get very excited and may experience difficulty in managing their feelings. Four-year-olds in particular often get very excitable. If you can see this coming you can step in and change the play to something more calm. Below are some suggestions for this:

- Get down to the child’s level, touch gently so you have their attention.

- For any age—singing, blowing bubbles, holding, wrapping up in a rug to do something quiet, rocking—all help children to relax.

- For a baby (birth to 18 months)—hold close and gently rock on your knee, a walk in the pram, a bath.

- For a toddler (18 months to three years)—a walk outside, building something together with blocks, or reading stories.

- For preschoolers (three to five years)—drawing, reading stories, watching a calming DVD that is not too exciting with you.

Rough-and-tumble play

Rough-and-tumble play with parents can be fun for children, however sometimes children become more and more excited, and may have difficulty stopping the game even when they have stopped enjoying it. Adults can take charge by giving children a hug, helping them to take deep breaths and then change to doing something calmer, such as a picnic or a ball game outside. It is a good idea for children to know the rules for playing these games, such as no-one is to be hurt or break things, and they may need to be reminded of these during the game. Remember to keep your own voice calm when you are trying to calm children.

Managing downs

You may not always be prepared for what might upset a child because they see and experience things in their own way. Below are some signs that may indicate something is wrong for your child, if they:

- get upset easily
- misbehave
- act younger than they are
- sleep badly or resist going to bed
- whine and cling
- get angry and act aggressively.

If you see these signs, have a think about what might have changed for the child. It might be as simple as a change from a cot to a bed, or as big as a new baby in the family or starting child care. Young children find it hard to put themselves in adults’ shoes, for example understanding adults decisions. They may believe you cannot play with them because you do not love them, or may become hard to settle at night as they need reassurance of your love.

If children experience difficulty managing change for more than a few weeks, it may be helpful to share concerns with a health professional or your early childhood service.