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## From playground risks to college admissions: Failure helps build kids' resilience

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Bubble-wrapping children doesn't work. They need to experience mild adversity, to know how to overcome it when they inevitably face it in life. (Shutterstock)

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With recent news of the college cheating scandal in which parents allegedly paid for their children to gain entrance to the most prestigious post-secondary institutions in the United States, increased attention has been placed on the extreme and even illegal measures parents will take to ensure their children are successful.

Parenting trends that protect children from negative experiences and failure are far from new. The concept of “helicopter parenting” emerged in the 1980s to describe overly anxious parents who hover over their children to keep them safe.

A second parenting trend called “intensive parenting” was later coined to describe overly invested parents who spend unprecedented amounts of time and money on their children’s activities and well-being — to ensure they have the best start in life.

More recently, “snowplow” or “bulldozer” parenting describes parents who are hyper-focused on their child’s future and will do anything to eliminate barriers to their children’s success, much like the allegations against parents in the U.S. college entrance scandal.

Ultimately, the goal of these parenting styles is to reduce a child’s exposure to hurt, distress, failure or a difficult life experience. But in the end, does this help or hinder kids? If they don’t experience adversity, how will they ever know how to overcome it when they inevitably face it in life?

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## Bubble-wrapping kids doesn't work

Research has shown that helicopter or bulldozer style parenting is associated with poor outcomes in children and adolescents, including mental health difficulties and low life satisfaction.

Children of helicopter and bulldozer parents have also been shown to be less resilient. For example, they do not seem to develop some of the coping skills required to solve problems independently.



UC Berkeley is one of two University of California campuses implicated in the U.S. college admissions scandal.  
(Shutterstock)

College students who described their parents as helicopter parents show decreased confidence in their ability to succeed.

In contrast, parents who support their child's autonomy by valuing their perspective and promoting independent problem-solving do better academically and have better mental health and well-being.

## When kids fail, it builds confidence

Resilience has been defined as the ability to bounce back from life challenges or difficulties and is a characteristic that is learned and fostered over time. By definition, then, a child needs to experience adversity to learn to overcome it.

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***Read more: Why kids need risk, fear and excitement in play***

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Children rely on supportive relationships and experiences within their families, schools and communities to help them develop the necessary skills to successfully navigate minor challenges and problems. When these are present, overcoming challenges or “bouncing back” is easier to do.

The types of adversity children can experience vary from mild to severe. For children, mild forms of adversity can include going to a new school or camp or meeting new people. Moderate stress can include more serious events, such as natural disasters or losing a loved one. Severe stress or toxic stress includes abuse and neglect.

Of course, we want to shelter and protect children from moderate and severe stresses as much as possible. Research is clear that experiencing high levels of adversity like abuse and neglect in childhood are associated with poor health and development.



From playground structures to college entrance exams – kids need to try things for themselves, take risks and learn to fail sometimes. (Shutterstock)

But what about small, everyday difficulties like losing a game, failing at an activity, doing poorly on a test or struggling to learn something new? These are the types of stresses that we need to allow our children to experience, and with our help, learn to overcome. Research shows this builds up their ability to be resilient.

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## Tips for promoting resilience in children

1. Foster a loving and positive relationship with your child, one where they feel safe to reach out to you when they need help rather than trying to tackle a problem alone.
2. Help your child develop other relationships in their families and communities that are supportive and caring. Healthy relationships with extended family, neighbours, coaches, teachers and friends can help buffer the child from mild, moderate and severe forms of adversity.
3. Model and support problem-solving. Our first instinct is often to jump in to resolve or fix our child's problem. Instead, try to step back, focus on the process and help your child find a few solutions to their problem. Get them to pick what they think is the best solution, and then once they implement it, ask them how they think it went and what they might do differently next time.
4. Encourage children to participate in extra-curricular activities that take them out of their comfort zone, or involve the development of a new skill. This is mildly stressful for children but gives them an opportunity to try something new and learn from the experience, while being supported in the process.
5. Help your child to develop confidence by praising them honestly for hard work and persistence. Reward the process, not the outcome.

The American Psychological Association Resilience Guide for Parents and Teachers provides further background and tips.

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