

How to Help Children Build Resilience in Uncertain Times



By: *Kenneth Ginsburg, MD, MS Ed, FAAP*

As parents, we want to protect our children from witnessing the fear and uncertainty brought by the [COVID-19](#) pandemic. We wish we could take away the disruption to their education, activities and relationships. And, we wish they were not exposed to suffering.

We cannot control these circumstances, but we *can* work to strengthen our relationships during this time while building our children's resilience. We *can* remember to say what so many of our grandparents said to us: "This too shall pass, and you'll get through this with me by your side."

The best way to protect our children is to shape the lessons gained during this difficult time. We do so best when we intentionally manage our own feelings and experiences with an eye toward helping them build resilience.

Below are some of the feelings many of us are experiencing, paired with the chance they offer us to model and teach lifelong resilience skills.

"I feel like I am failing": Learning self-forgiveness

Perfection is not an option here. Know that if you forgive yourself and focus on the good in yourself now through self-compassion, your child or adolescent will learn to be a bit gentler with themselves. That is lifelong protection.

"My kids are frustrated, and so am I": Learning to empathize

One of the most respectful things we can do is genuinely understand someone else's point of view. The best way for children to gain this perspective is by benefitting from it firsthand. You build their empathy for others by working to understand their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.

“I don't know how to handle how I feel”: Processing and releasing emotions

A time of uncertainty with heightened emotions is the time to show that emotions are not to be ignored. Our children must learn from us that having emotions is good, talking about them is necessary and being honest with them is healing.

“I want to pull my hair out”: Creating a safe haven within our homes

You can love your child and still sometimes want to tear your hair out. We all have bad days when the stress load is high, and it's high now. We cannot control the outside world, but we create sanctuaries within our homes. With peace in our homes, we can better handle the outside world.

“I need a time out”: Being a calming presence for others

In moments when the future is unclear and our minds begin racing toward worse case scenarios, the presence of a reassuring voice makes all the difference.

“I don't know how to respond”: Being clear and honest with yourself and others

Say what you do know. Admit what you don't.

“My mind feels out of control”: Maintaining physical health strengthens emotional health

Strong bodies support our minds to best navigate the circumstances we confront. Say out loud: “I can't just sit on the couch all day. I'm going to exercise. If I don't take care of my body, I can't focus as well.”

“I keep thinking about the worst-case scenario”: Stay present and live in reality

Uncertainty can make our minds race to the worst possible outcome. Catch those thoughts and say, “I am imagining the worst. Let me focus on what is really happening.” Young people can assume the worst because they have not *yet* had the experience to know that crises come and go. Let them know “You'll get through this with me by your side.”

“I feel helpless”: Finding what you can do

Few things create discomfort more than feeling like there is too much to do . . . or nothing you can do at all. And few things restore comfort more than tackling what you can. Model the importance of one of the most calming words: “Yet.” “I'll NEVER _____!” can transform into

"I haven't _____ yet." Don't accept failure or disappointment as permanent but instead view setbacks as opportunities to try *yet* again.

"I can't do everything": Learning to let go

Stay healthy, strong, and compassionate. Take care of those who are vulnerable. Let family members know they are precious. Do what it takes to keep a roof over your head and food on the table. Everything else can wait.

"I am so disappointed": Find joy, give service, and maintain purpose

Help your children see the difference they can make in others' lives and how good it feels to give service. This may enhance their own resilience because they'll learn the joy of giving. More important, they'll learn there is no pity in receiving.

"I had so many plans that aren't working out": When you can't change things, adapt

Many of our plans are not working out. Focus on what you *can* make a reality and what you *can* do.

"I miss my family and friends": Relationships strengthen us

This is a generational defining moment. If this generation learns that when times get tough, people unify, it will be the generation who can lead us into a better shared future--one in which we hold those we love nearer and offer those who are vulnerable the extra support they deserve.

"Will things ever be the same?": Hope

Resilience is about more than bouncing back. It is about adapting. Growing. Becoming stronger. Being ready for the next challenge, but also being prepared to savor all the good life has to offer. I hope that by the time you read this, the most difficult times will have passed. But, I also hope that these lessons endure.

Uncertainty is frightening, but knowing that we are not alone to figure it out brings comfort. Any individual alone is vulnerable, but joined together we are stronger than the combination of each of our individual strengths. People together can take turns between drawing strength from others and being a source of strength. We will get through this when we come together!

If you found this article helpful, download this [free online-exclusive chapter](#) from Dr. Ginsburg's new book, [Building Resilience in Children and Teens: Giving Kids Roots and Wings, 4th edition](#). It includes expanded information about building resilience during this

pandemic, including guidance on how to create a safe haven within your home, be a calming presence for others, and find hope for a better future.

More Information

- [Parenting in a Pandemic: Tips to Keep the Calm at Home](#)
- [Teens & COVID-19: Challenges and Opportunities During the Outbreak](#)
- [Tips for Coping with a New Baby During COVID-19](#)
- [Mental Health During COVID-19: Signs Your Teen May Need More Support](#)

About Dr. Ginsburg



Ken Ginsburg, MD, MS Ed, FAAP, is author of the AAP book, *Building Resilience in Children and Teens, 4th Edition*, which will be published on May 26, 2020. He practices Adolescent Medicine at The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia and is a Professor of Pediatrics at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine. He directs Health Services at Covenant House Pennsylvania, where he serves Philadelphia's youth enduring homelessness, and is also Founding Director of The Center for Parent and Teen Communication. His AAP multimedia toolkit, "Reaching Teens: Strength-Based, Trauma-Sensitive, Resilience-Building Communication Strategies Rooted in Positive Youth Development," prepares professionals to be the adults young people deserve in their lives.

Last Updated 6/9/2020

Source American Academy of Pediatrics (Copyright © 2020)