



Life skills for kids

Jul 06, 2008 By Kate Lewis

Resilience can, and should, be taught to children say co-authors and parents Tania Roxborough and Kim Stephenson.

Building resilience is like adding to life's toolbox. Coping with the "inescapable challenges of life" are skills which will help children develop to their full potential, they say in their new book *Kids Behaving Bravely: Raising a Resilient Child*.

With six children between them, the women decided to write a book that would help other parents increase their children's resilience, the ability to "bounce back" from adversity using internal and external resources.

Persistence, adaptability, self-esteem and courage, goal setting, social and emotional literacy, empathy, optimism and humour are all part of internal resilience. External resilience includes being able to ask for what you need and get support, having positive relationships with adults and peers, and good role models.

Kids Behaving Bravely is the second book the pair have written together and follows on from *No It's Not OK*, a book on combating bullying. *Kids Behaving Bravely* grew out of the first book when the authors began thinking about why some kids coped better with bullying than others. It also made the authors aware of the power of words in shaping behaviour.

A big part of teaching resilience, says Stephenson, is using language which models and encourages skills such as persistence, self esteem and adaptability. Communication is key. So is love, they say.

Children facing new or difficult situations often feel lonely, fearful and vulnerable, say Roxborough and Stephenson. Yet it is all too easy for parents to tell children "not to be silly" or to refuse to talk about it because their fear seems trivial.

Instead, they say, parents need to listen to children in a non-judgmental way, understand why they are afraid, reluctant or resistant and then help them work out a way to deal with the fearful situation.

Denying children's fears does not build resilience, they say. But nor does being an over-protective "helicopter parent".

Children need the opportunity to be exposed to situations - to become "responsible risk-takers", they say.

Overprotected children with helicopter parents never get the chance to develop resilience. "You can take away risks, but at what point do you give your child conditions to grow?" asks Stephenson. Parents need to ask themselves what they are afraid of. "Sometimes it is their own fears getting in the way."

Teaching children resilience, says Roxborough, gives them coping strategies for when life inevitably turns to custard. "It gives children tools to help them in the long term."

Kids Behaving Bravely is largely based on what has worked and not worked with their own children, ranging in age from 16 years to a 6-week-old baby (Roxborough has two and Stephenson four, including the baby).

You learn a little bit more with each child, says Stephenson: "You do what you know - and when you know better you do better."

They hope they don't come across as "experts". Yes, the book is a "how to" book - how to help your children "bravely" face fears and phobias, conflict, changes, loss and grief, and to take up new opportunities - but it is not meant to be prescriptive. Instead, they say, the book is designed to give parents options to consider.

Nor is it meant to make parents feel guilty about "getting it wrong". Parents need to know they can make mistakes and these are not irreversible. And adults need to develop their own resilience.

Both women are from teaching backgrounds. Roxborough, the author of more than 20 books, is a secondary school English teacher in Dunedin. Stephenson specialises in school guidance counselling, heading the guidance faculty at Whangaparaoa College.

Roxborough, who has written everything from novels for teenagers to texts on Shakespeare and English grammar, moved from Auckland to Dunedin two years ago to take up a writer in residency, and stayed on.

The writer and teacher has another children's novel coming out next month, two finished manuscripts with a publisher, and a book of haiku based on Shakespearean characters in the making.

The women are considering another joint venture - a book about how to become resilient as a parent. As they say in *Kids Behaving Bravely*, "No matter how well prepared you are, how well equipped you are, these kids are going to throw stuff at you that would flatten even Superman..."

* *Kids Behaving Bravely: Raising a Resilient Child*, Tania Roxborough and Kim Stephenson (Penguin, \$30).

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