

Building resilience in bereaved children: for parents and carers

Resilience is the ability to adapt to difficult or stressful events in our lives.

The strongest oak of the forest is not the one that is protected from the storm and hidden from the sun. It's the one that stands in the open where it is compelled to struggle for its existence against the winds and rains and the scorching sun.

Napoleon Hill (1883-1970)

We often talk about children being resilient and somehow believe they bounce back more readily than adults just because they are children. But a child's resilience has a lot to do with their self esteem – how they feel about themselves, what they know they have and can rely on, and what they can do well.

Building resilience is especially important for bereaved children. Nothing can take away the sadness when someone important to them dies, but we can support them to feel good about themselves and help them to find ways to manage the worries and uncertainties that come with this huge change in their life.

Important things that will help build resilience are:

- Reassuring children that they are loveable, and are loved.
- Reassuring them about who will care for them, and that there are people they can rely on.
- Understanding their vulnerabilities and, when apart from them, letting them know where you are and when you'll be back etc.
- Letting them know who is there for them when they want to talk, have a cuddle etc.
- Keeping as far as possible to familiar routines, which increases a child's feelings of security and maintains a sense of continuity.
- Encouraging children to express their thoughts and feelings, and helping them to know that whatever they feel is OK.
- Helping them find ways to manage difficult feelings and worries.
- Being able to trust in the adults around them, through honest and age-appropriate responses to their questions.
- Asking them what they think and listening to their point of view about things that affect them.
- Involving them appropriately in decision making, which can help them feel more in control.

- Supporting children by letting school know how they might be and asking them what they might need - and identifying who they can talk to or be with there when they find things difficult.
- Understanding that they may react differently to things they would usually take in their stride, like falling out with a friend – any change is likely to be more of a challenge for a bereaved child who is facing lots of change in their life.
- Encouraging them to do things they like that are helpful and recognising the contributions they make, without expecting them to take on adult responsibilities.
- Showing them that you believe in them and what they can do.
- Acknowledging when they have managed things that are difficult for them.
- Giving praise for things they do or are good at – every child is good at something.
- Telling them why they are special to you.
- Keeping your expectations of them realistic, and not being afraid to let them know that usual boundaries are still in place.
- Recognising that adolescents may talk more to their friends than to their family, but this is an important source of support for them.
- Understanding that it's important that everything isn't overshadowed by the loss in their life – it's OK for them still to be children, to laugh, play and have fun.
- Encouraging appropriate independence in the knowledge that you are there to hold their hand when they need it.
- Helping them have hope for the future.

And remember:

You are a role model for the children in your care. Showing them you value yourself by making time for you and not having too high expectations of yourself really matters.

It can be immensely difficult to try to meet all your children's needs when you are also grieving. Be kind to yourself and don't try to be a 'superparent'.

Just do the best you can, and remember Child Bereavement UK is always there to support you if you need it.