

Resilience is Relational

By Dr Justin Coulson

What if everything you thought you knew about resilience was... wrong? Or at least incomplete?

Resilience, to many, means when the going gets tough, the tough get going. If you're resilient, you go solo with that individual grittiness, push through the pain, and get it done. It's perseverance. It's getting up when you get knocked down. It's drinking some concrete and hardening up.

Perhaps this is true - sometimes. But experience and research point profoundly towards a different story: Resilience is relational.

What does this mean?

My personal trainer recently asked me to do a plank and push through two minutes of this horrible exercise. By 60 seconds, I wanted to stop. I was shaking. I felt uncomfortable. It hurt. But then I heard his voice: "Nice! You're halfway there. Only 60 seconds to go. You've got this."

I steadied myself and pulled it together. By 90 seconds I was pretty sure I was done. Everything hurt. Then his voice: "You're doing well. Super strong. Just 30 seconds left."

With 15 seconds to go I wanted to give up. I was making strange noises, gasping for air, and trying to tell him I hated him (but I couldn't form the words). "So close now. You're doing it. Let me count you down... 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1."

I collapsed. He high-fived the air because I couldn't lift my arm. And then I realised: while I was the one who did the exercise, he was the one who helped me show resilience. I would have quit at the halfway point without him. Resilience is relational.

The Research Backs This Up

Emmy Werner's groundbreaking Kauai Longitudinal Study followed 698 children born in 1955 for over 40 years. About 30% of these kids faced serious adversity - poverty, family discord, parental mental illness, perinatal complications, unemployment, drug-and-alcohol abuse. Two-thirds of these children struggled, just as you might predict. But one-third thrived despite the odds.

What made the difference? Werner identified three clusters of protective factors, but relationships were woven through all of them:

- A close bond with at least one stable, caring adult (often a grandparent, aunt, uncle, or teacher—someone who believed in them)
- Support from teachers, neighbors, youth leaders, or mentors
- Connection to community groups or faith communities

It wasn't their toughness or independence that saved them. It was... connection.

What This Means for Parents

That plank story isn't a parenting story. But the application is all about parenting. When your child can't do a maths problem, write an essay, read a tricky word, tie a shoelace, clean up a messy room, or figure out that difficult stanza in the song she's learning, telling them to "toughen up" and figure it out themselves is precisely the opposite of what we ought to do.

Instead, remember resilience is relational. You are more likely to push through hard things when someone is there to support you. This doesn't mean doing it for them. My trainer didn't hold my plank position for me. But his presence, his voice, his belief in me kept me going.

When your child is struggling:

- Move closer, not further away
- Be their voice when theirs is shaking
- Offer encouragement: "You're doing it. Keep going."
- Break it down: "Just this next bit. You can do this next bit."
- Remind them you believe in them

I know that some of you are thinking "I sit with my child and try to support them through their spelling or their cleaning up (or whatever it is) and they don't make progress. They just wail and complain and tell me they can't."

That's life sometimes. Here's what I know though. Once those emotions have calmed down, your support will bring them back for another bite at the cherry. They'll keep going when they've got someone in their corner. Be that strength when they don't have their own.

The Takeaway

Real resilience isn't forged in isolation. It's built through connection. So the next time your child faces something hard, don't step back. Step closer. Be their personal trainer. Count them down. High-five the air when they can't lift their arm. That's how resilience is built. Together.

One caveat: this only works when the struggle is worthwhile. Suffering through busywork "because it's on the curriculum" isn't resilience, it's just suffering. Your kids don't have to be resilient about *everything*. Be aware of what matters and what doesn't. But when the challenge matters? That's when you matter too.



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