

Resilience, Mindfulness & ADHD Success



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Nurturing children with ADHD starts with realizing that ADHD is much more than an attention disorder. More so it is a condition of self-regulation—children with ADHD have a decreased ability to organize and manage their lives. As a result, ADHD impacts anything requiring persistence and forethought, and gets falsely confused with poor motivation or even low resilience. Resilience represents the capacity to handle challenges and bounce back from adversity and is a vital attribute for children to develop, and critically so for those with ADHD.

In reality, ADHD has little to do with the *desire* to work hard. With ADHD, a child's brain is delayed in the development of executive function (EF), the skills required for everything from daily routines to learning. Higher intellectual functions including organization, decision-making, persistent effort, managing emotion, and planning for the future can all be affected. ADHD impacts the ability to make plans and sustain effort. Without those abilities children easily get mislabeled as not working hard or caring enough.



It's not that children with ADHD don't want to keep up with peers, it's that they cannot do so without our support. The entire idea of self-advocacy, prominently emphasized in so many schools today, relies on EF. Because of that, most students with ADHD and poor EF cannot be the ones to figure out what to do about ADHD.

ADHD easily leads to a continual state of frustration. That in turn makes motivation, self-esteem, and confidence suffer. We all want to see children persevere and succeed, especially when challenged. Undermanaged ADHD undermines that capacity for resilience on all fronts.

ADHD and the Brain

There's no quicker way to decrease resilience than to suggest to a child with ADHD, either directly or implicitly, that he can succeed if only he tries harder or gets his act together. Whatever it may seem like from the outside, the effort is almost certainly there for a child with ADHD, but having ADHD makes it look otherwise.

Because it is a life-management disorder, ADHD has the ability to impact anything and everything. It challenges a child's ability to handle daily routines and not only affects his ability to learn, but often family and peer relationships, too. It has been linked to a high rate of obesity, teenage driving accidents, poor sleep, and many other physical risks.

With ADHD, the parts of the brain responsible for EF (primarily the frontal lobes) are immature. To paraphrase psychologist and ADHD expert Dr. Russell Barkley, ADHD is not

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about not knowing what to do, it's about not doing what you already know. A student doesn't leave his homework at home or forget to take his lunch because he's lazy and doesn't care. As frustrating as all this may be to parents and teachers, it's even more frustrating to a child.

Most children with ADHD work as hard as they're able. To sustain motivation, they require positive feedback from adults, and need to experience success. ADHD gets in the way of both. Children with ADHD also lack the planning skills to figure out how to get past ADHD—because those strategies rely on EF. With enough failure and negative feedback, in the long run true motivation and effort may fall apart as well.

Fostering Resilience in ADHD

According to psychologist Dr. Robert Brooks, resilience is not a fixed, unchanging trait. Resilience builds from various factors, including strong relationships, a positive mindset, a sense of one's own strengths, the experience of success, and concrete skills that allow for effective problem solving. In the absence of these experiences, resilience wanes.

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Supporting resilience is important for emotional and intellectual growth. It starts with being warm, compassionate, and understanding role models and reminding ourselves that no one is perfect. Everyone struggles, everyone screws up, everyone can do better, and children must learn to trust their own abilities when facing a challenge. Here's what it takes to support resilience in the classroom and at home.

Focus on strengths and success.

Resilience grows as children acquire a clear sense of what they enjoy and what they do well. For a child with ADHD struggling in school, it becomes that much more important to find other outlets for success. When mistakes happen, address them without judgement, anger, or blame—*Let's find a better way for you to finish that assignment.* Take notice and offer positive feedback and emotional support—*You're doing great, no need to give yourself a hard time.*

For children to sustain motivation they must experience *actual* success. Young kids do not

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have the capacity to rationalize for themselves, “Nothing is going well now, but if I work hard it will get better in a couple of years.” It's our job, as the adults with mature EF, to provide functional supports around ADHD. Plans created by students with ADHD get undermined by having ADHD in the first place—a painful, vicious cycle. Adults need to accommodate for a child's delayed self-management skills in the short run and then actively work to support the development of these skills over time.

Provide emotional support.

Resilience increases when a child grows up around at least one adult providing consistent affection and role modeling. ADHD strains relationships and marriages, which impacts children and creates a sense of tension in families. Supporting families living with ADHD means taking into the consideration its impact on parents and siblings, and helping to pave the way for easier relationships. Of course, a teacher or other school staff member can also become a source of consistent support for a child.

Build practical skills.

Conquering a problem does not require effort alone; the proverbial ant will never move the rubber tree plant because he simply isn't big and strong enough. It's not enough for children to care, they require neurologically based abilities to manage adversity. With ADHD, that means guiding children on how to flexibly think through problems, organize, and otherwise address challenges. Since anything novel or new calls on EF, academics benefit from direct instruction across subjects and tasks; anything learned to fluency reduces



demand on the parts of the brain most impacted by ADHD.

Emphasize a positive attitude toward adversity.

Resilience also requires seeing the value of effort, recognizing that challenges are an opportunity to learn, and developing determination in believing that problems can be conquered. For children, that starts with a focus on what's in their control, praising effort and honoring small steps that build towards success. Steer children towards an optimistic belief in their own competence and ability to grow—*That's awesome! Nice hard work.* The concept of mindset means showing children the value of effort, not relying on fixed traits like intelligence or unsustainable goals like getting all A's.

A Mindful Focus

Mindfulness provides a useful perspective around ADHD: seeing things as they are, with acceptance, and then making proactive, objective choices in life instead of staying caught up in habit and reactivity. ADHD is a poorly understood, stress-creating condition, and managing it requires flexible problem solving, breaking habits, and sustained effort. Mindfulness develops non-judgmental awareness, such as the capacity to see through the rampant misperceptions of ADHD, and therefore helps parents and teachers make direct, compassionate choices to manage it.

As stated previously, ADHD is a medical condition leading to a delay in EF. However off task,

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defiant or obstinate children may seem, that behavior often arises right out of their ADHD. Short-term success follows when adults more clearly accept that these children are delayed in the development of specific skills. It's frustrating and demanding for everyone, but solutions that see ADHD clearly allow for more targeted care, and better outcomes.

Under stress, we all fall back on habits, have a harder time thinking outside the box when problem solving, and struggle to stick to plans. As ADHD influences everyday life routines, it creates an atmosphere of stress; parents report higher frequency of anxiety, depression and marital strife. Supporting families in general, so that they feel more grounded from day-to-day, helps them manage ADHD more easily.

Since ADHD impacts problem-solving, an EF-based skill, the more comprehensively we manage ADHD, the more resilient children become. Thorough care over many years requires an evolving plan drawn from an indi-

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made at least some progress in the gender area. At least the reader hopes that the appalling treatment Solomon, a gay man, experienced in his childhood at a renowned East Coast independent school, would not be repeated today.

Finally, understanding the courage, commitment, and love shown by so many of these parents can inspire us all to do more to support all families facing these or other, apparently lesser challenges. As someone said—apparently no one knows who—“be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle.” ●

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individualized mix of educational supports, behavioral therapy, parent training, medication, exercise, sleep, and more. As ADHD symptoms decline, almost by definition problem solving and, therefore, resilience both improve.

Practicing mindfulness allows us to more easily see through habitual mental patterns that undermine ADHD care, like “He just needs to work harder” or “It must be my fault.” It supports both parents and kids in staying settled when upset, in working through hard decisions, and in sustaining the tremendous effort required to overcome ADHD. Mindfulness relates to how we live our lives when challenged, and eases the challenge of breaking habits. It augments almost every aspect of ADHD care.

As with all children, to stay resilient those with ADHD require solid relationships, problem solving abilities, experiences of success, and the confidence that through effort they will overcome adversity. Undermanaged, ADHD undercuts all of that. With consistent, mindful support over time from adults, children with ADHD thrive. ●

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