

Building Resiliency

Parents wish they could protect their children from all manner of unpleasantness—pain, fear, worry, and disappointment. We go to great lengths to make sure they don't see violence on television. We carefully screen movies, video games and even friendships.

And then one day on our way home from the grocery store, right before our very eyes, a horrific auto accident leaves bleeding victims scattered across the road. Our child stares in disbelief at an impossibly cruel scene. What she has seen will replay in her mind a hundred times.

Try as we might, we can never achieve complete success at protecting our kids from the world's harsh realities. The world happens to us all, bringing joys and sorrows to everyone belonging to the human race. Given this truth, parents disagree about the best approach. Some parents point out that, since it's impossible to shield children, we should just go ahead and expose them to the reality. For these parents, telling the truth about the world's dangers and disappointments is more wholesome than creating an untrue fairytale for their children.

Three-year-old Frankie's parents set him straight when he wonders about family dynamics. They openly acknowledge that there are times when "Mommy doesn't like Daddy" very much. These parents say they have chosen to "Tell the Truth" to their children from the beginning, and they adhere to that program.

Another family I know leans to the other end of the spectrum. Last year when their beloved cocker spaniel became ill, they told the children that they gave him away rather than admit he died at the veterinarian's office. They avoid discussion of any unpleasantness in front of the children, choosing instead to portray an Ozzie-and-Harriet image to the kids.

Both of these extremes fail to give the children the foundation for hope and the potential for resiliency they'll need as adults. Statistically, children who are exposed to too much and children who are protected too much will both struggle eventually.

A study after World War II found that London children who had some sheltering while also dealing with the reality of war actually developed greater resiliency than either children who were entirely sheltered or children who were exposed too much.

Where we stand on this continuum is largely a matter of family and personal belief. But it should also be based on what is most helpful for kids. Overprotecting children so that they never learn to deal with pain fails to prepare them for adulthood. Overexposing them to hardship steals their confidence as they expend their energy trying to cope.

A path down the middle enables us to stand beside our kids while they gain experience at dealing with adversity. The lessons they carry into adulthood should be true, but they should also engender hope.