



Why Tears are the Secret to Fostering Resiliency in Kids

by Dr. Deborah MacNamara

There is much talk of how parents need to avoid overprotecting their kids and allowing them to experience failure as a part of routine life. The idea that adversity teaches resiliency is an important one but only tells part of the story. Why is it that some kids thrive despite the hardship they face while others struggle to survive under the same conditions or better? How do we account for people who face adversity but do not rebound or recover? While hardship is the catalyst for change, it is not the driver of it. Our emotional system is what holds the secrets to human transformation and is where we need to look deeper as we search for answers.

Adversity only teaches *when what doesn't work sinks in*. It is our capacity to feel sad in the face of all that cannot change that allows us to become transformed by the experience. It is the acceptance of what is futile that leads us to surrender and changes us in the process. In our quest to cultivate happy, resourceful kids, we cannot eclipse the essential role of sadness and tears in this process.

The Science of Tears

All tears are not created equal. Some are benign like those cried to cut onions. Some have an angry raw edge to them that leave little doubt that someone is full of frustration. Then there are the tears that are soft and sad, where the hurt has happened and the emotional system is pushing towards release and repair. It is these sad tears that make us distinct from other mammal species. It is these tears that hold the secret to adaptation.

For adaptation to occur we need to cease from pursuing things that are futile. For kids there are many futilities in life, from siblings that don't go away, losing, not being able to turn back time, limits and restrictions, good things coming to an end, and not being able to someone change someone's mind. When the futility of these pursuits sink in, the brain is rewired accordingly. Neurons that fire together wire together – futility clips the pathways that do not lead to success.

When a child accepts that something is really futile, it can bring feelings of sadness and disappointment or the release of tears. These feelings or tears don't harm a child but are a sign that healing is underway and are the best indicators of emotional health. It is these children who will be best able to realize their potential as adaptive beings.

Children who cannot experience sadness are often full of aggression and foul frustration. Anxiety and attention problems often occur with stuck tears along with opposition, defiance, and even bullying. It is our tears that make us fully human and humane. Children who lose the capacity to cry tears don't need lessons but adults who can restore their emotional systems and make them vulnerable again. Failure is only a gift when you have your tears.

What is the role of parents?

The biggest losses in life are matters for the heart and not the head. It is feeling the sadness around what doesn't work that leads to resiliency, recovery and

resourcefulness. The challenge is that these feelings can be overwhelming and children need support if they are going to express them.

In a National Longitudinal Study on Adolescent Health, Michael Resnick and his colleagues found that the single most significant protective factor against emotional distress in a sample of over 90,000 adolescents in the United States was a strong caring relationship with an adult. Resiliency isn't something we have to teach our children, it is a by-product of healthy adult relationships. What matters is who a child turns to when upset, who they share their secrets with, and who they shed their tears with.

We need to have our children's hearts if we are help them to their tears. We need to invite them to express what doesn't work without trying to fix it. We need to make space for their disappointment instead of problem solving and strategizing solutions. We need to help them name what isn't working, and to rest from futile pursuits. We need to help them sit in the vulnerability of surrender and communicate that we are confident there is a way through.

Five reasons for why we have a hard time letting our kids cry or feel sad

There are many reasons why tears are unwelcome in children and as a result, can be suppressed or ignored by parents, thwarting their potential as adaptive beings.

1. The more a parent believes happiness in a child is a sign that they are parenting well, the less they will be inclined to make room for sadness. The underlying belief that sadness is a problem instead of a normal emotion will serve to inhibit expression.
2. Some parents may feel their children's tears are too distressing or too frustrating to listen too. We all come to parenting with a different relationship to our own tears and children will act as a lightning bolt in revealing where we are at. As parents we need to make room for the emotions our children stir up in us.
3. In our quest to raise independent children, there can be a belief that tears are a sign of weakness. Hardiness stems from being able to experience vulnerable emotions and allows a child to bounce back when facing hardship or adversity.
4. There was a time when tears in men were a sign of virtue and character but this is no longer the case in most cultures. Notions of masculinity and gender stereotypes have made it less acceptable for boys to show these feelings. As a result, boys are not as likely to experience encouragement nor be invited to express these emotions.
5. Sometimes there is an overreliance on logic and positive thinking which can get in the way of promoting sadness and disappointment. In dealing with adversity, problem solving and fixing things becomes the modus operandi instead of making room for all the emotions that go along with the experience too.

Emotions need to be expressed, feelings need names, and kids need people to share their stories with. When we communicate there is something wrong with tears or emotions, we can prevent children from having a relationship with their emotional world.

We need to affirm for our kids that getting hurt is part of life but the answer lies in facing one's fears, finding one's tears, and holding onto someone who is holding on to you. We can't spare our children from all that comes with the world they live in—

this is impossible. It is our job to make sure we don't send them into it empty-handed.

When we help our kids realize that they can survive what doesn't work, it can open the door to new possibilities that might. Adversity doesn't teach on its own, it is the emotional transformation that we undergo that does. We need to be the tear collectors our children require.

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