

Building resilience in children

Staying connected is key



Experts advise parents to build relationships with their children, instead of waiting until problems arise



Amelia Teng
Education Correspondent

Counselling psychologist Kelly Lee once came across a 10-year-old girl who created a YouTube channel to share self-made videos of herself doing craft activities.

The hobby soon turned into a source of anxiety for the girl when she received harsh comments online criticising everything from her appearance to ability.

"She couldn't tolerate the comments, things spiralled out of control, and she developed fear, anxiety and depression. Her parents weren't even aware that she started this online channel," says Ms Lee, who has been practising for 16 years.

Many parents may not be aware of their kids' online activities or how they are struggling emo-

tionally, she says, echoing the findings of a recent study on youth mental health.

The Youth Epidemiology and Resilience study of 3,336 respondents aged 10 to 18, as well as parents, found that only about one in 10 parents observed signs of distress in their children.

In contrast, one in three adolescents reported such symptoms.

The study, led by Associate Professor John Wong from the Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine at National University of Singapore (NUS Medicine), is the first nationwide study of adolescents' mental health and resilience. Data was collected from 2020 to 2022.

Participants in the study with good mental health scores also fared well on the Singapore Youth Resilience Scale, a locally developed evaluation of 10 aspects of resilience, including perseverance and positive self-image.

Resilience scores dipped for respondents aged 15 and 16, who reported scores of about 167 to 168. On average, boys had higher resilience scores (75) than girls, who scored about 167 across all 10 domains. The maximum possible score is 250.

Four aspects of resilience, in particular, contributed to better mental well-being: positive self-image or optimism, personal control, relationships and social support, as well as emotional regulation.

Prof Wong, director of the NUS Mind Science Centre, which is

under NUS Medicine, says identifying these key domains will help young people and their parents to actively develop strategies to handle stressors they could encounter in life.

"Youth may develop evenly or differently across the 10 domains of resilience, in relation to their temperaments, childhood upbringing, family and social environment they grew up in, and importantly, how they internalise and translate their early life experiences into positive coping strategies," he says.

Apart from experiencing puberty and the psychological stages of adolescent development, today's youth are confronted with larger societal trends like digitalisation and globalisation, he adds.

The unprecedented level of social media exposure is another key factor, says Ms Lee.

"There are a lot more platforms where they can possibly meet people from around the world, and this becomes a difficulty when they start to compare themselves with others, as their self-esteem is affected."

Educational psychologist Danielle Seah, who has also been practising for 16 years, adds: "Sometimes, youth grow up with this idea of perfectionism. Unfortunately, that breeds an inner resentment, and they might put themselves down for not being good enough."

This can be problematic for adolescents, who are forming their identity while being bombarded with images and content they may

not fully understand, she says.

Ms Lee and Ms Seah wrote a booklet, *Raising A Resilient Child*, for parents on the different aspects of resilience and how they can better support their children.

Research has found that good parenting is often the most significant factor for boosting resilience, which is the ability to cope despite adversity or stress.

BUILD A RELATIONSHIP

Ms Seah encourages parents to be more proactive and build a relationship with their children, in-

stead of waiting until problems arise.

"Research has consistently shown that you just need one parent – or one adult caregiver, even if it's not a parent – who is there consistently to support the child," she says.

Ms Lee adds: "Start building up the connection – the trust and the bond – first. That's the most important foundation in every parent-child relationship."

Set aside time to talk to your children and check in on them, she says. "It's usually from these regular chats that things might come up, that they might start sharing about what's going on in school or in their life."

SPOT SIGNS EARLY

Parents should look out for early signs of distress in their children, such as withdrawal from social interactions and becoming quieter than usual, says Ms Seah.

They may also be more sullen, grouchy or irritable over a prolonged period. Other signs include having trouble sleeping or not engaging in hobbies anymore.

Younger children tend to express their emotions more outwardly through meltdowns, tantrums or crying, says Ms Lee. "As they get older, they might become a bit more withdrawn or stay in their room a lot. They might not want to communicate or go to school."

CONTINUED ON C2

Building a connection – of trust and bonding – is the most important foundation in every parent-child relationship, say experts. PHOTO: ISTOCKPHOTO

Research has consistently shown that you just need one parent – or one adult caregiver, even if it's not a parent – who is there consistently to support the child.



MS DANIELLE SEAH, educational psychologist, on the importance of parents being connected with their children in developing resilience among the young

Be a role model, but do not overprotect

FROM C1

BE SPECIFIC

Parents have to remember to praise their child, says Ms Seah, and be specific about the good behaviour that they want to see more of. "Make sure that the praise is genuine and specific – like if they were sharing with their sibling or being helpful – so it's not just a generic 'good boy' type of comment," she adds.

Ms Lee says: "By just noticing what he's doing, it already helps the child feel good and slowly build up his resilience."

Similarly, be specific about negative actions and distinguish between a child's behaviour from his character.

"Sometimes, children may not exactly be aware of behaviours that are not appropriate," she says. "Rather than saying 'You are a bad boy', which may damage his character, point out the behaviour that is not right."

SET GOOD EXAMPLES FOR CHILDREN

Parents need to be consistent with what they say to children, who look up to them, says Ms Lee.

For instance, a part of resilience is being flexible, adjusting to changes and trying new things.

"If your child brings something new to you, show interest in it even if it's something you don't quite like, so that the child sees his or her parent making the effort to be flexible," she says.

It is also important for parents to be consistent with each other, she adds. Otherwise, children can get confused.

Be conscious of how you respond to your child, says Ms Lee. "For instance, parents' comments and reactions to their kids' results can signal to them your real expectations."

DO NOT OVERPROTECT

Resilience and perseverance can be taught from as early as the age of one, and at different milestones of children's development, says Ms Lee.

"When they are learning how to walk, if you don't let them fall, how are they going to learn how to stand up again?"

"When they're learning how to eat, let them try and make a mess, until they can eat right, instead of just feeding them," she says.

"Nowadays, parents tend to be more overprotective, partly because families have only one or two kids and they feel more pressure (to do well at raising the children)," says Ms Lee. This does not help children learn resilience and perseverance.

"If parents swoop in to solve every problem, then kids don't get to experience small failures and don't learn how to bounce back. And when they actually do fail, it's like the end of the world."

Ms Seah adds: "If you keep fixing the child's problems, he or she doesn't learn those skills or just learns to rely on other people."

This is also related to having a sense of personal control, she says.

"We want children to feel that they can be in control of things that they need to do. It also gives them confidence that they can do it."

ateng@sph.com.sg