Raising Resilient Kids

Simple strategies to help your child weather life's rainy days and tough times **By Louisa Kamps**

During bleak moments—when word comes that a close relative has been in a bad car accident, or wonks on the radio are forecasting still more economic hardship ahead, or the nightly news is all about the latest fast-spreading virus—I cringe. And then, barely a second later, I find I'm fearing for my kids' well-being.

It's a natural parental impulse: to put our children's safety and equilibrium above our own. The other day, when I was fretting about the fast-rising cost of our health insurance, I turned to see my 5-year-old, Charlie, beaming as he zoomed a Hot Wheels high over his little brother's head. I felt a wave of worry wash over me. How can we keep two kids healthy and merry, I thought, in a world that can seem as precarious as the one we live in now?

Psychologists who study emotional development say there's plenty of reason to be hopeful about our kids' ability to survive major setbacks. Most of us, young and old, are able to rebound from tough times, and →

70% of students (grades 5 to 12) feel they are thriving

parents—even those feeling stressed themselves—can do a great deal to foster optimism and, perhaps more important, resilience in their children, experts say. "Optimism is a hopeful outlook. It is an important feature of resilience, but resilience also involves a skill set," explains Robert Brooks, Ph.D., a psychologist on the faculty of Harvard Medical School and coauthor of *Raising Resilient Children*. "To be resilient and bounce back from adversity, you must think before you act, be an effective problem solver, and learn from your successes and mistakes." In fact, weathering stormy moments can be a valuable reminder that stress and trauma are part of life, and an opportunity to teach kids how to deepen and strengthen their coping skills.

> "People who end up being most successful in life are those who experienced some adversity in childhood and learned how to cope"

Here, from parents and experts, are five strategies to help keep you and your kids thriving emotionally, no matter what's flying at the fan:

1 Don't make your child wear rose-colored glasses Of course parents want to shield their kids from bad news and bury sad doings under the playroom carpet. But after nearly 40 years of counseling children and adults, Brooks reports that kids—with their amazing parental-anxiety radar—"quickly sense when there are 'family secrets.'" And once that happens, kids' fantasies of everything that could go wrong are, says Brooks, "just like adults' fantasies: often far worse than reality." For this reason, openly discussing tough times and the potential outcomes of uncertain situations is almost always better than saying nothing. "If we put things in a way that kids can understand, and make clear that we are there to help them deal with their anxieties, they often can handle more than we realize," says Brooks.

That's what Caron Blau Rothstein, 38, of Portland, OR, found to be true. When she was diagnosed with cancer in 2008, she and her husband gathered their three boys, then 9, 7, and 5, for a family meeting. "We decided to be honest and forthright from the start," she says. "Once we knew my treatment plans, we told them what would happen and that we'd update them. We said that things would be tough for a while, but then get better. Most important, we gave them the opportunity to share their feelings. Our honesty and determination to keep things as normal as possible—to show them that life does go on—is what made this year doable for everyone."

Helping a child stay rooted in the present, rather than in an anxiety-laced vision of the future, also helped Wendy Thompson,* of New York City. Her 9-year-old son knew his dad's company was laying off workers, and he nervously asked her what would happen if his father lost his job. To curtail his worst-case, what-if projections, Thompson addressed his concerns directly. "I said we had enough money saved up to last X amount of time, and that would be long enough for his dad to find a new job," she recalls. "He found that reassuring. I think kids need concrete answers."

This kind of frank approach, with some specific details, allows a child to manage the uncertainty and trains him not to spiral downward during hard times. Brooks notes that even a child as young as 3 or 4 can handle an explanation like, "Grandpa is sick, but doctors are doing everything they can to help him." **By focusing on what's being done to make things better, you help your child feel more informed and in control**—in a word, more resilient.

2 Hone her problem-solving skills In addition to wanting to shield our kids from life's hard stuff, it's also parental nature to want to fix our children's problems. But always swooping down with some form of Band-Aid robs kids of an important growth opportunity. **Feeling capable of improving a tough situation is a key component of resilience.**

So model this skill, advises Brooks, even in very small steps. "If finances are the issue," he says, "parents can call a family meeting to develop belt-tightening strategies." Encouraging kids to contribute their own ideas helps them feel more competent and confident, too. And if cooking at home instead of getting takeout is one new money-saving move, says Brooks, "you can involve kids by saying, 'What can we make this week?' The more we encourage kids to problem-solve, the less overwhelmed they feel."

3 Mind your mood Hard as it may be at times, try not to worry out loud when kids are within earshot. When parents voice feelings of despair, →

*Names and identifying details have been changed.

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their kids follow suit, says Janet Hyde, Ph.D., a professor of psychology at the University of Wisconsin and cofounder of the Wisconsin Study of Families and Work. "Kids who develop their own negative cognitive styles become more prone to depression than peers who have learned from their parents to think more positively," she notes.

Though Chicagoan Charlotte Watters,* 42, tried to be positive when she let her 15-year-old son know that she and her husband were getting divorced, she was actually mired in rage after learning that her now-ex had been having an affair. "But I knew I had to **model**

Resilience Rules

Four simple moves that'll nurture a bounce-back kid, from John Scardina, a school psychologist and parent educator in City Island, NY:

- **GIVE YOUR CHILD THE REINS** When your child is talking about a tough situation, let her finish, then say, "This must be really tough." Pause. "What are you going to do about it?" The key here is to show you are tuned in by acknowledging the pain she is feeling, but ultimately turn it back on your child to handle it.
- **CAST A VOTE OF CONFIDENCE** As your child formulates a plan, give her a boost by saying, "I see someone who is caring," or "...strong," or "...good at x, y, z." Reflecting her assets back to the child helps her realize she is capable of handling the situation, tough as it may be at first. "Say, 'I know you can handle this, but if you need help, let me know,'" says Scardina. "Then leave them on their own."
- **CREATE A GRATITUDE LIST** Help a kid going through a tough phase count his blessings and cultivate optimism: Have your family write up and post a gratitude list of five to 10 things to be grateful for. The message: These good things in life are here to stay, regardless of challenging situations. When your child is feeling low, remind him to look over his list.
- **CALL IN THE PROFESSIONALS** If your child has hit a rough patch and experiences sleep or appetite disruptions or lethargy, or you notice a change in relationships with family and friends, it may be time to have a therapist step in. Ask your pediatrician, family practitioner, religious leader, or school guidance counselor for references. —*Jacqueline Nochisaki*

good behavior," she says. "I told my son I was strong and he didn't have to worry about me. I'd say to myself, *What would a brave person do?* and I would try to do that. I was very conscious of pretending that I had a life—going to dances at the church or to the movies with friends. Both alone and with my son, I'd look for fun and adventure. In truth, it was the last thing either of us felt like doing half the time. But it turned out to be the right thing for us both." Watters intuitively knew she needed to keep a lid on her own roiling emotions for her son's sake, and research showing how attuned children are to their parents' feelings underscores the importance of her approach, Hyde notes. By adopting an optimistic attitude even when she wasn't really feeling it, Watters helped her son learn that we can, through force of will, help ourselves rebound.

4 **Keep them connected and engaged** Perhaps the most encouraging news about resilience, many psychologists now agree, is that it's more common than experts believed even a decade ago. Resilient kids, researchers find, are often particularly good at cultivating positive emotions by immersing themselves in strong relationships and meaningful activities. "The more capacities and connections you have, the less likely it is that the worst effects of traumatic events will permeate your life," says George Bonanno, Ph.D., a psychology professor at the Teachers College of Columbia University.

It's true that for all kids "there's a point at which it's not good to dwell on small everyday hardships, where you need to get outside of yourself and be a part of things bigger than yourself," says Richard Weissbourd, Ed.D., a psychologist on the faculty of Harvard's School of Education and author of *The Parents We Mean to Be.* For parents, this means that "fostering resilience has a lot to do with helping organize activities around both your children's strengths and what they enjoy," he says. **The very act of belonging and taking care of others that naturally occurs in groups and in other organized activities creates what can be called moral reflexes** that will provide kids with comfort and strength throughout their lives.

"It's certainly important for kids to know their own feelings, and for parents to talk to them about what they're experiencing," adds Weissbourd. "But we should spend as much time helping them understand other people's feelings and learn how to care for other →

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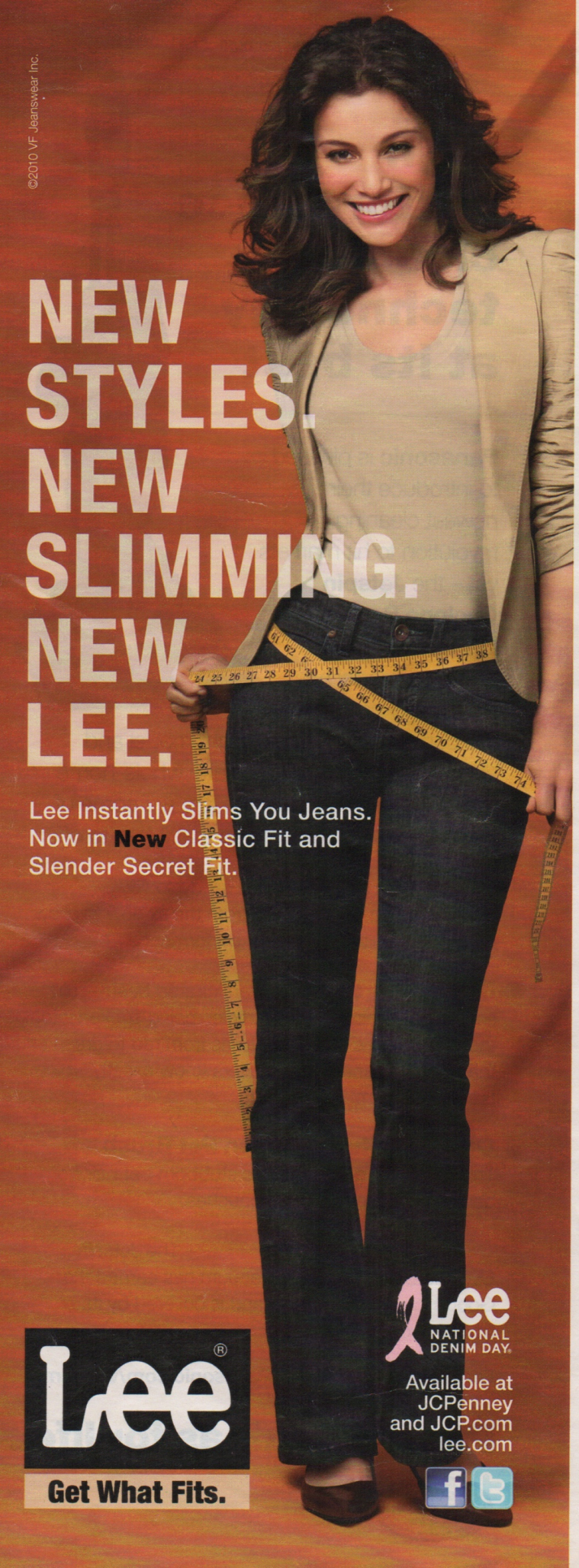

people. Because ultimately, strong relationships are the most important source of lasting well-being we have."

5 **Frame setbacks as a chance to grow** When trouble hits, Hyde says, parents need to let their children know that whatever painful emotion they're feeling is legitimate—but also reassure them that they'll bounce back. "When my husband died," she says, "sometimes my kids and I would just cry together." But she also tried to frame their situation as positively as she could with the thought, " 'It's not going to sink us; things are going to get better, and we'll be stronger and wiser for it.' "

It is in dealing with difficulties, Hyde says, that children begin to recognize their own emotional strength,

> "Reassure them that they're going to bounce back, stronger for what they've been through"

which will serve them well throughout their lives. "They build coping skills, and when they hit another bad situation, they're better able to handle it."

Weissbourd agrees: "I don't want to romanticize suffering in childhood. But research suggests that the people who end up being most successful in life are those who experienced some adversity in childhood and learned how to cope with it." Though "not a fan of excessive, mindless praise," Weissbourd thinks **it is important for parents to commend their kids when they are stepping up to challenges and reaching out to help others,** so they can take pride in themselves. "When kids are handling adversity well or do an uncommon act of kindness, or perform an impressive act of community service, we need to say, 'You really handled that situation well. That was an impressive and good thing to do.' This helps kids convert feelings of passivity and helplessness into those of activity and mastery."

After all, decades of research have shown that people high in "self-efficacy"—those who believe they're capable of handling challenges and who are inspired by their own past successes when their confidence wavers—tend to remain emotionally stable (a.k.a. resilient) through adversity. And when we're able to see the silver lining, hard times offer parents a chance to help our kids develop grit, bounce, and a sense of competency that—no matter how bleak the nightly news may be—will see them through the years ahead. ■