

10 KEY PROTECTIVE PARENTING STRATEGIES



1. START EARLY

It's never too early to promote healthy attitudes, emotions and behaviors in your children. The development of resilience is a step-by-step process. By establishing healthy skills early, you create a foundation to learn, grow and adapt. Be on the lookout, too, for risk factors that can interfere with your children's healthy development and respond quickly and effectively if they emerge.

2. KNOW THE FACTS

Learn about what in your children's lives can promote or get in the way of their healthy development. You can help protect them and reduce risk. Some of your actions might seem like common sense, but different ages and stages require different strategies. The key is to be flexible and adapt. We know there's no art of perfect parenting, so keep learning all you can from trusted sources. These include friends and relatives, your children's health care providers and teachers, and from child development experts, researchers and practitioners.

3. BE A GOOD MODEL FOR HEALTH AND RESILIENCE

Parents have the greatest influence over their children's attitudes and behaviors, so it's very important to model safe, appropriate and healthy attitudes and behaviors for them. More than friends, teachers or celebrities, you are your children's primary role model, and they're watching what you do even more than they're listening to what you say. That doesn't mean you have to be perfect. Even your flaws and slip-ups can demonstrate effective coping and social skills, including how to apologize, forgive, be honest about your shortcomings and bounce back from a challenge. Being a good model also means taking care of yourself. You can normalize the act of seeking help when it's needed.

4. COMMUNICATE OPENLY AND HONESTLY

Have open conversations with your children. This creates a dynamic where they will feel safe to come to you with questions or problems and confident that what you tell them will be true and honest. This is part of building a strong social support system for your children, a key ingredient for raising resilient kids. Without mutual trust, they may not develop a strong sense of security and stability or know where to turn when they need support.

5. SHARE YOUR EXPECTATIONS

Set clear boundaries and limits, make your stance known and follow through on the agreed consequences. While you don't want to overwhelm them or set unreachable goals, it's important for them to know that you believe they are intelligent, responsible and capable. Clear expectations, rules and a shared understanding of consequences for breaking them provide your children with a sense of stability, consistency and security. This applies both in the home and outside the home. If it is clear that your expectations are based in love and concern rather than a "because I said so," they will know that you truly care about their health and safety. They will, in fact, strive to meet your expectations and respect your rules.

6. MONITOR THEIR BEHAVIOR

Part of parenting is protecting your kids from harm as they develop into healthy and fulfilled adults. This includes knowing where your children are, what they're doing and who they're doing it with. Today, monitoring also requires keeping an eye on your children's (and your own) screen time and social media use. Too much time spent on screens and social media has been associated with poor mental and physical health, weakened family bonds, and reduced connection to school and community. Inevitably, your children will sometimes resist. Monitoring, done from a place of love and care, can help you recognize and address potential threats to their safety and well-being. Spending quality time together, asking lots of questions, and really listening to their answers will help you be attuned to changes in your children's emotions, behaviors or appearance, and to signs of risk. At the same time, be flexible and adjust how and how often you monitor as your children grow older and (ideally) demonstrate increasing maturity and responsibility.

7. TAKE A HEALTH, NOT A PUNITIVE, APPROACH

Focus on supporting your children's health rather than punishing unhealthy or unsafe behaviors. A health, rather than a punitive perspective, will yield better outcomes and will let them know that your primary concern is their well-being. This means that if your child is struggling emotionally or behaviorally — which can show up in frustrating ways and try your patience — get them the right kind of help rather than resorting to punishment. It's highly unlikely that your child will behave poorly just for the fun of it; there's usually a rational reason for their fights or outbursts and, more often than not, a reasonable solution.

8. ENCOURAGE HEALTHY RISK-TAKING AND EMOTION EXPRESSION

It's normal and natural for children to take risks and to express a broad range of emotions. If you can help your children do so in safe and healthy ways, they will be less likely to engage in and develop dangerous habits. Help your children face challenges and go beyond their comfort zone. They'll learn how to adapt to new and complex situations, manage setbacks and develop new skills. Likewise, stress, anger and fear are not necessarily bad emotions. In fact, they're really useful signals that something isn't quite right and good drivers of change, as long as they do not persist or overwhelm your child.

9. USE POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT

Give positive feedback when your children show effort or engage in desired attitudes and behaviors. An important part of instilling resilience is recognizing and acknowledging that resilience. So, when they do something that exceeds expectations or makes you proud, let them know. You'll be more successful in keeping positive efforts going by acknowledging them, instead of reprimanding your kids when they don't meet your expectations.

10. KNOW YOUR CHILDREN'S RISK LEVEL AND RESPOND ACCORDINGLY

Know whether your children are susceptible to mental or physical health problems or substance use, be vigilant for and responsive to signs of risk, and know when and how to seek help for them — and for yourself — if needed.