

## LOOKING FOR STRENGTHS

*Promoting resilience in children is an optimistic and pragmatic approach based on the belief that change is possible. Used more and more by professionals, it is also of practical value for adopters and foster carers.*

Children who need a new home don't just need a permanent home, they also need qualities that will help them live their lives – “qualities which cushion a vulnerable child from the worst effects of adversity in whatever form it takes and which may help a child or young person to cope, survive and even thrive in the fact of great hurt and disadvantage.” Resilience is sometimes described as “normal development under difficult circumstances.”

Children who come into care often feel that they are not worth anything. They feel that they have no control over their circumstances and no way of making an impact on their environment. They feel helpless and powerless. Building up the resilience of children could help them form positive attachments with a variety of people and feel they can make a difference.

What can a child develop their feelings of confidence and effectiveness?

1. **Having a secure base:**

A child will find it easier to venture out into the wider world from a safe and loving base. One way of providing this is to build up a protective network of support for the child, through making use of all possible sources of support that could be available, for example, siblings and other relatives, neighbours, former foster carers, teachers and other school staff, club leaders and so on. In other words, it means valuing the child's past and finding possibly small but significant ways for people to contribute to their sense of identity and worth.

2. **Making school a positive experience:**

For some children, school is seen, as somewhere you *have* to go, a place where you can mess about. Encouraging a child to look at all the opportunities provided by school, not only for learning, but for joining in activities and clubs (drama, chess, sport etc), making friends and relating to teaching and non-teaching staff, can transform their view of school. School can then become another secure base from which the child can develop self-esteem and build relationships with other children and adults.

3. **Having friendships:**

Being able to make friends – and the right kind of friends – and maintain these friendships will help a child feel less isolated. To do this, the child will need both skills and opportunities. Social skills can be improved: for example, by helping the child reflect on what has happened in a particular situation, by providing examples of alternative ways of doing things, by showing by example, by role playing.

Disruptions in children's lives can make it difficult for them to sustain friendships, especially for younger children who often make friends with people close by. Later on, friendships can be more easily maintained by common interests and greater independence. School, after school and community clubs and outdoor activities can all provide a starting point. For some children – young ones obviously, but also older ones with challenging behaviour – it can be necessary to choose activities which are closely supervised by adults who can intervene in case of difficulties.

4. **Taking part in valued activities:**

Children with low self-esteem often find it difficult to try out a new activity. They feel they have no talents or interests. They often understand the question "What would you like to do?" as meaning "What are you good at?" and so have nothing to say. Ways round this include find out about past interests which could be revived, sharing a hobby with an adult, trying out activities as tasters, without pressure to pursue them or win, and so on. For example "One 15-year old girl wrote to Rangers Football Club and now receives their newsletters and information. Her esteem was greatly boosted by seeing that she could act on her own initiatives". Children may feel threatened by competition so it may be helpful to try non-competitive activities.

5. **Holding positive values and caring about others:**

Some children will need help in understanding that positive social behaviour is linked to emotions and feelings, both their own and those of other people. This can be done by exploring situations with them to see how much they have taken in other people's points of view, and by creating situations in which they can behave in a helpful, caring and responsible way. Lateral thinking can be valuable: for example, children could be encouraged to take an interest in nature and the environment or to care for a pet.

6. **Developing social skills:**

Children usually learn their social skills at home, before extending them further afield. Those who have been deprived of early warm and secure relationships may need help in developing their social skills. They often need a language to express their feelings and to learn how to relate to others, in particular, how to reflect, how to understand cause and effect, how to resolve conflicts.

Thinking in terms of resilience means that you can focus on a child's strengths rather than their problems. In practical terms, it means that, as well as talking about their feelings, you can work on what is important to them and what they would like to try and do. This also implies having an overall, ongoing, view of them and their lives.

Boosting children's resilience should enable them to take part in "normal" childhood activities and relate to others in a more constructive way, come to terms with their early experiences and deal more effectively with new events, and generally help them feel more in charge of their lives.

[Based on two articles which appeared in BAAF's quarterly journal *Adoption & Fostering*]