

2 November 2021

Growing up is not straight-forward

by Michael Grose

The pandemic has delivered change and upheaval to families on an enormous scale. Many parents fear for their children and worry about the impact that remote learning, reduced direct social contact and missed milestones will have on their children. Upheaval is not new for some children, particularly those who've experienced illness, a loss of a loved one or who've moved home and changed schools. Each change requires acceptance, adjustment, and an attitude realignment to help them fit the new circumstances. Every change is an opportunity for a child to grow and develop, if they are supported, and they're not overwhelmed by the experiences.

A child's pathway to adulthood, and the accompanying journey of their parents, is generally viewed as linear. Growing up is seen as a straight-forward march from infancy, early childhood, childhood, adolescence, post-adolescence to adulthood. If COVID has taught us anything it's that a child's journey is full of twists and turns.

While your child has a developmental clock that keeps ticking over, it's their experiences that determine their maturity and their ability to reach fully-fledged adulthood with the resilience, grit and adaptability needed to thrive. What are the experiences that will help children mature and cope with adversity when it inevitably comes their way? The experiences that develop maturity and coping capacities fit into two broad areas – challenging and positive experiences.

Challenging Experiences

The challenging experiences that a child encounters enable them to build their coping capacities and develop their emotional resources that contribute to their maturity. These challenges include:

Conflict

Disagreements, arguments, and rivalry is part of growing up. Whether it's a dispute with siblings or a fallout with a friend, negotiating conflict is a developmental task.

Rejection

Rejection by a friend or group is hurtful and feels horrible, but it also builds a level of social smarts and judgement necessary for navigating relationships in later life.

Loss

This takes many forms including a friend moving away, the death of a pet and the passing of a family member. Loss is the cause of sadness, grief and heartbreak that can feel overwhelming. However, with time and support kids learn to cope and get on with their lives.

Disappointment

Losing a game, not being picked for a team, not receiving a gift they wanted are unpleasant but character-building experiences that help kids develop perhaps the most treasured resilience capability of them all – acceptance.

Unexpected change

Although few kids like it, and many will fight it change, acceptance of change and the ability to adapt to circumstances is a short cut to maturity and resilience.

Failure

Mistakes are seen in three ways. They are activities to be avoided, signs of failure, or opportunities for further learning. Resilient learners know that mistakes, even initial failures, are part of every learning process so the risk of failure doesn't hold them back. Children and young people grow from these experiences as coping and recovery generally build character, confidence, and resilience.

Positive experiences

Though children and young people will inevitably experience challenging experiences, positive experiences help to balance the experience ledger by building a child's identity, wellbeing, and emotional collateral.

Love

Knowing that a child is loved and loveable is at the core of their self-worth. Self-esteem and identity built in adolescence needs a solid foundation of self-worth.

Friendship

Making and keeping friends is an essential life task linked to many aspects of happiness and wellbeing.

Contribution

The ability to belong to groups through contribution fulfils a basic need. It allows children to experience real gratitude and feel needed, which builds self-esteem.

Expectation

When life becomes challenging or when stress and anxiety build, children need something positive or fun to look forward to. Hope and anticipation are well-known antidotes to stress.

Excitement

Fun, joy, excitement! Any activity that shifts children's and young people's emotion from unpleasant, low energy to pleasant and high energy is a good thing.

Play

Involvement in enjoyable activities such as hobbies, interests, sports, music, games, creative and performance arts are central to healthy wellbeing. Activities that are fun, freely chosen and create flow (the ability to lose track of time) fit the criteria of play.

In closing

A child's age and related milestones is a recognised marker of their development. However, their life experiences, as much as the number of birthdays they've had, contribute to their maturity, resilience, and readiness for the wider world.