



Parents



Little Sparks
Big Starts



Positive & negative experiences

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The theory

Your child's brain grows in stages, and the first 1,001 days from pregnancy to age 2 are especially important. During this time, their brain is growing fast and is very sensitive to what's happening around them. This sensitivity continues through the early years (from birth to age 5), and again during the teenage and young adult years (ages 11 to 25).

How do we know this?

Children's brains are shaped by the things they experience every day. Some children naturally cope better with challenges, but all children can build resilience through loving care and positive experiences. Resilience means being able to manage tough situations and bounce back. Too many negative experiences, like stress or instability, can make it harder for the brain to grow in a healthy way. But positive experiences like feeling safe, loved, and supported help children build strong brains and better skills for life.





What does this mean?

For babies
9 months - 1 year 11 months



Responsive care is key
Babies need love, comfort, and attention from caring adults. When they feel safe and cared for, their brains grow stronger and more resilient.

Stress can be harmful
Babies are very sensitive to stress. If they experience too much, like being left alone or feeling unsafe it can slow down their brain development. Feeling safe and loved helps them grow in healthy ways.

Bonding helps brain growth
Simple things like cuddling, smiling, and talking with your baby helps their brain develop. These everyday moments build strong connections and support resilience.

For toddlers

2 years - 2 years 11 months



Support independence and emotional expression

Toddlers are starting to understand their feelings. Help them learn to name emotions like “sad” or “angry,” and show them ways to calm down when things feel hard.

Provide safe boundaries

Clear and loving rules help toddlers feel safe. When they know what to expect, it’s easier for them to manage stress and feel confident.

Foster positive relationships

Toddlers are learning how to connect with others. Strong bonds with trusted adults and friends help their brains grow and build resilience.

Encourage problem-solving

Preschoolers are learning how to make choices and solve problems. Let them try new things and work through small challenges with your support — it helps build confidence and resilience.

Consistency and routine

Children feel safer when they know what to expect. A regular daily routine helps them manage stress and feel more secure.

Positive reinforcement

Praise your child for trying hard, not just for getting things right. Encouraging effort helps build self-esteem and teaches them to keep going when things get tough.

Stress awareness

Notice when your child feels frustrated or worried. Offer comfort and help them learn ways to cope with difficult feelings.

For children
3 years - 4 years 11 months





The role of early years settings

Support responsive relationships

Early years staff build strong relationships with children through everyday care and play. This helps reduce stress and supports healthy brain development.

Create a safe environment

A secure, stable environment allows children to flourish. This sense of safety is essential for healthy development and managing stress.

Tune in to stress signals

Practitioners notice when children are feeling overwhelmed and offer comfort and support early, helping prevent small worries from becoming bigger problems.

Support social connections

Staff encourage positive interactions with other children and adults, helping children build strong relationships and learn how to cope with life's ups and downs.



What you can do at home

Create positive experiences

Parents and carers help build resilience by spending loving, quality time with their child. Showing care and understanding helps children feel safe and supported.

Respond to stress

When children feel overwhelmed, calm and consistent care helps them feel secure. This support protects their development and helps them manage emotions.

Exploration and problem-solving

Letting children try new things and solve small problems with guidance helps build confidence and resilience. Challenges should feel manageable, not too big.

Tune in to stress

Noticing when a child is stressed and offering comfort early can make a big difference. Seeking help when needed supports healthy development.

Final thought...

Building resilience in children starts early and is a long-term process. Whether you are a nursery staff practitioner, parent, or caregiver, your ability to provide consistent, nurturing, and responsive care plays a crucial role in healthy brain development. By minimising harmful stress and fostering positive, enriching experiences, you help children build the resilience they need to face life's challenges and thrive.



Helpful terms

1001 Days: The time from pregnancy to age 2, when the brain is growing very fast and is most sensitive to experiences.

Resilience: The ability to cope with challenges and bounce back from difficult experiences.

Responsive Care: When adults notice and respond to a child's needs with love and support.

Social Connections: Relationships with other children and adults that help children learn and grow emotionally.

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