

## ***Shielding Our Children: Cultivating Resilience*** ***By Colleen Drobot***

As we explored in the first article: *Feeling Our Way into Fall*, to cultivate resilience in our children, we need to allow them to grieve what they cannot fix or change in their lives. We can help them to find acceptance of things beyond their control. And in the process we are helping them build resilience. But what if we could fix the situation? When do we move in to effect change to protect them?



This leads us to the second key in cultivating resilience; helping our children thrive by *shielding* them from experiences that are too wounding for them to endure. When humans experience challenging experiences that produce prolonged or intense feelings of anxiety or frustration and they don't release these emotions, the brain kicks into action. It protects a person from experiences too vulnerable to bear. It numbs us out so we don't have to feel too much. I see this with kids all the time who proclaim, "*It doesn't matter, it didn't bother me, I don't care*" and they mean it because they can't feel their wounding anymore. If the heart is soft, it will naturally *care*, it will *feel*, it will need to *express* what is inside. A soft heart can express vulnerable feelings, such as fear, worry, embarrassment, sorrow, longing, missing, frustration, guilt and shame. Even if a child is very young, it is natural for them to be able to say I'm sad, mad or scared. A soft heart will allow the child to release these pent up emotions, and find emotional and physical rest, at least for a bit. But with too many traumatic experiences, a *hardening up*, not a toughening up will happen. There is only so much a child can endure before their system becomes overwhelmed. At times, they will need their shield to get through tough times, but that shield should come down when they are in the safety of a loving relationship. We don't want our children to lose their ability to feel



their emotions altogether. But it can happen so easily, especially for sensitive children. Because children are so open and at risk for wounding, it may not take much or take long for the brain to start to protect the child. We can see this protection in the movie *Stand By Me*, where young boys struggle with their lives and teeter on

hardening up to life in the face of the difficulties they endure.

If we want resilient kids we need to make sure life is not taxing them so much that they retreat into protection mode. Too much wounding leads to a shutting down, the opposite of resilience. This means as parents, we might need to make some changes, protect them from situations and people who could, sometimes unknowingly, wound our child. Certain moments of difficulty can be survived but when hurtful situations occur too frequently or are too severe, then trouble can ensue. The defence mechanisms of the brain were meant to protect the child episodically, not chronically. But too many children experience wounding daily and are paying the price. When my son was young, I needed to find teachers, instructors, coaches and caregivers who he felt safe with, who treated him well, and were patient and kind. This is less important to him now that he has matured and gained resilience. But when he was a younger child, I needed to pull him from classes or situations that had the potential to provoke his defences. As Gordon Neufeld points out, the brain that *rests* is the brain that *grows*. A brain can't mature a child *and* at the same time chronically protect a child. It can only do one or the other. If the brain is always working at keeping the child safe, there is not the luxury for a child to play, mature, and learn.

So, although we can help a child grieve when they cannot change their situation, we sometimes must make a change for them when the alarm or frustration is over the top. This includes only leaving them with people they trust. The young or sensitive child must have some attachment to their

caregivers, teachers and coaches. If we see the tears are drying up, frustration or anxiety are becoming chronic, and the child is not expressing what distressed them, these are red flags that a change must be made. This is not always easy and may mean we have to let go of our goals or agendas in order to protect them.

Unfortunately, there will be times when we cannot change our child's situation. It breaks our heart when they aren't invited to the party or the best friend drops them, when the instructor ignores them or a relative speaks harshly to them. In addition to drawing out the sadness they feel, we can protect them another way. The best shield of all to help protect our children from overwhelming experiences is their relationship with us. The more securely attached a child is to us, the more protected they are from outside wounding from others. If we matter most to them, then others do not have the power to hurt them. Unfortunately, we won't be able to protect them from the typical bullying, teasing, exclusion that goes on when they are not with us. Our attachment acts as a shield from the bullying, wounding, and painful experience they must endure. That is why their connection to us is so vital; without it, they have no shield and are prone to hardening up.

It is difficult to know when to let our children enter into challenging situations to see if they can adapt, and when we need to pull them out and protect them. We must consider the circumstances, trust our intuition, and look for the red flags that alarm and frustration are starting to harden our child or distress them too much. If we can focus on relationship and attachment, we can work to slow life down and soften their hearts so that they can develop resilience. And cultivating a healthy relationship with them is the most powerful gift you can give them that will protect them their whole life.

