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NTDC Right Time BUILDING CHILDREN'S RESILIENCE QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Question 1: What is resilience?

Resilience is a person's ability to adapt successfully to challenges. Resilience is often referred to as the way that we "bounce back" from a hardship, a disappointment or even a physical injury. To be resilient, you need a positive view of yourself and confidence in your strengths and abilities. Life skills such as being able to communicate clearly, to solve problems and to manage strong feelings and impulses also are important to resiliency.

Sometimes people talk about children as if they were naturally resilient, but families have a very special role when it comes to building a child's resilience. One of a family's most important jobs is to manage or to regulate the level of stress coming in and out of the family. This is how families provide stability and consistency and how they nurture the ability to be resilient. Human beings naturally have a lot of capability to respond to hardships, especially if they can draw support from their relationships with other people. Even with that support though, we can feel overwhelmed when we face challenges that are severe or never-ending. In a well-functioning family, parents keep an eye out for hardships, protect children and help them cope when hard things take place. Families also have the job of nurturing the children's resilience to deal with future challenges. The roots of resilience that a person has as a teenager, young adult and throughout life are nurtured during childhood by the experiences provided by a loving family.

Question 2: How can I start helping the child I am fostering or adopting to become more resilient?



A caring family provides the foundation for a child's resilience. According to Harvard University's Center on the Developing Child, "The single most common factor for children who develop resilience is at least one stable and committed relationship with a supportive parent, caregiver or other adult. These relationships provide the personalized responsiveness, scaffolding and protection that buffer children from developmental disruption."

In other words, trusting in you and following your example will enable the child to bounce back from challenges in the child's life. The relationship with you will give the child a sense of safety and stability to lean on when facing future problems and obstacles.

The quality of care and family interactions, along with the emotional warmth of the person or persons caring for the child, can help a child to develop the knowledge, ideas and abilities that are part of the foundation for resilience. For example, a good model of a caring family is one that interacts a lot with the children—such as talking with them, reading with them, playing with them and taking them to the library or to the playground to experience little adventures. These types of activities help children to develop a sense of security and hope for the future.

Question 3: What are some things that parents who are fostering or adopting can do to provide a caring environment for children they are parenting?

Children need strong connections with caring adults. Simple gestures such as greeting a child with a “Hello” and a smile can go a long way toward letting the child know that you are interested and there to support the child. Likewise, finding ways to say “Yes” to the child throughout the day will help to create connections. Make a point to spend one-on-one time with the child in the morning, after school and before bedtime. During this one-on-one time, focus only on the child’s interests. Make sure to find positive things to say to the child and to find ways to “fill the child’s cup” throughout the day.

Slowing down the pace of life also is important because a child who has experienced trauma, separation or loss needs more time to adjust when transitioning from one activity to the next. The child is likely to need extra instruction about expectations as well. Rushing children who have histories of trauma can add extra stress to a relationship, which can result in outbursts of negative behavior. Open communication about expectations before doing an activity or making a visit somewhere can help children to know what parents who are fostering or adopting want from them. Children with histories of trauma often have missed a lot of early instruction about how they should behave; so, parents who are fostering or adopting who openly and kindly share what they want from children can help to position the children for success.

Question 4: What are protective factors that lead to resilience?

We all face risks every day. **Risk factors** are those parts of a person’s life that can increase chances for negative or unhealthy outcomes. Risk factors exist in all areas of a person’s life – the individual’s biological and psychological makeup and the many parts of the person’s “world,” such as the person’s community, family, school, work and neighborhood environments. **Resilience** is the ability of a person to remain healthy even in the presence of risk factors. **Protective factors** are those such as personality characteristics or relationships with others that can buffer or lessen the impact of risk factors and improve the person’s resilience.

Some of the most important tools or skills that families can teach children to nurture their resilience for the future include how to:

- focus their attention,
- regulate their emotions,

- how to use critical thinking to solve problems, and
- get along with other people.

Until children can regulate their own emotions, parents who are fostering or adopting may have to become an external regulation system, helping children to control and to stabilize their emotions. Even though this is an important job, it starts small and takes time. For example, when a child is upset, such as when getting a shot, attending the first day of school or falling and getting a scraped knee, it's up to the parent to calm the child. Parents also build the child's knowledge by teaching skills such as how to make friends. Learning new skills builds confidence, optimism and hope; these attributes are important for children to take into the world as they mature. When children go to school, teachers also begin to help children regulate their emotions. In other words, a positive school environment can nurture resilience.

Little successes contribute to building resilience, but small failures also can build resilience. As a parent who is fostering or adopting, you can nurture children's growth and development by giving them opportunities to explore and to learn. Choose opportunities that match the child's capabilities; then step back while the child has a chance to try new skills. Part of this experience includes failing, but in a manageable way. Small failures teach us how to get up and to start again, which is important for resilience. When a child has loving caregivers who are encouraging, even if the child fails at a task, the child can develop a mental attitude and motivation to keep on trying. The job of the parent is to figure out what is enough of a challenge for the child without it being so much that it will overwhelm and discourage the child. Matching the opportunity to what the child can handle lets the child build confidence in capabilities.

Question 5: How does my resilience affect the child whom I am fostering or adopting?

As we strive to teach children to become resilient, we need to keep in mind that children learn best by example. The more often children can see you using the building blocks of resilience, the easier it will be for them to learn resilience skills.

Think about how you demonstrate these different components of resilience in your own life:

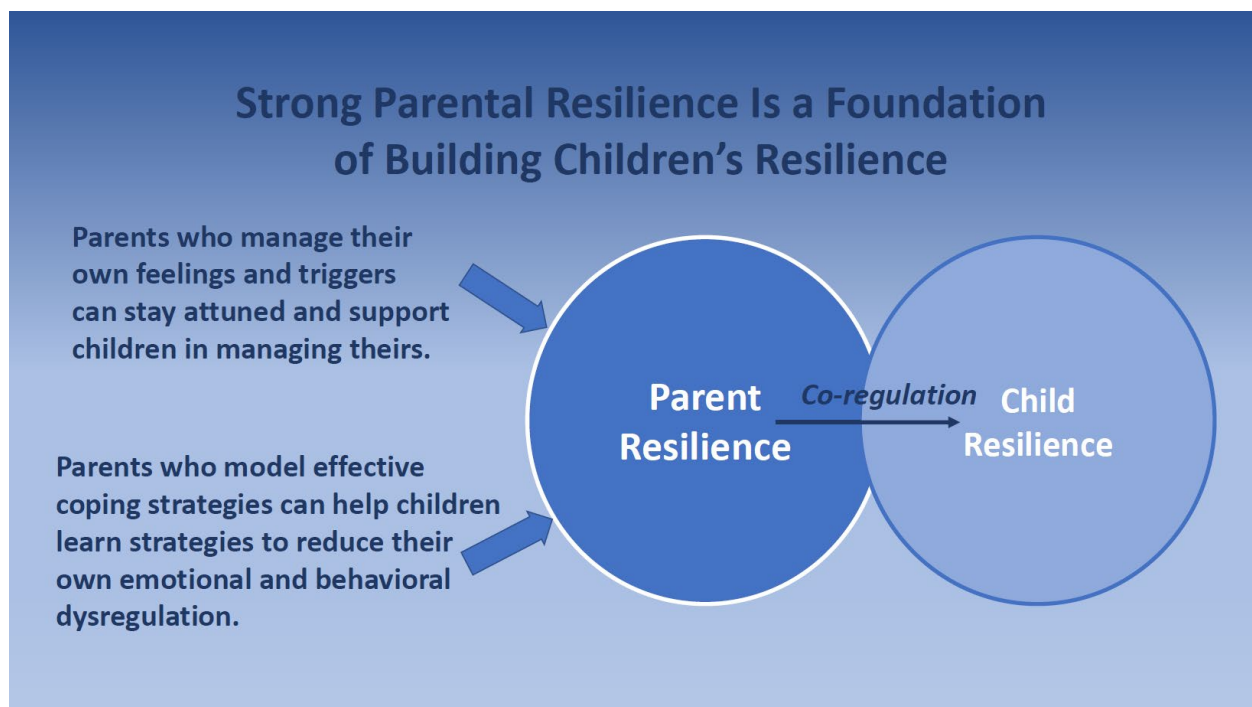
- **Sense of belonging:** This helps you to feel confident when facing challenges because you know there are others who will support you. This could be done by talking with a friend, partner or family members when you need advice; participating in a support group for parents who are fostering or adoption or; taking part in cultural or religious events.
- **Self-efficacy:** Believing in yourself and your ability to get things done gives you confidence about what you can achieve. You can do this by using positive self-talk to remind yourself of your strengths; displaying confidence when you go into an unfamiliar or high-pressure situation or; reflecting on past challenges and identifying what you have learned from them.
- **Self-regulation:** These skills help you to stay calm, cool and collected during times of stress. This can be done by making time for routine self-care; setting boundaries to keep

from becoming overwhelmed by activities or; using deep breathing, meditation or physical movement to help manage stress

- **Sense of identity:** This reminds you of who you are and allows you to draw from your past experiences as you face future obstacles. Recognizing that you don't have to know all the answers and asking others for advice when you need it. You can do this by finding humor in difficult situations and laughing if you make a mistake or listening to feedback from others but making a decision that supports your values and beliefs

When the child in your care sees you drawing upon these building blocks of resilience to deal with a difficult situation, the child will begin to learn to do this as well. Be intentional about identifying the resilience skills that help you most so that the child you are fostering or adopting can learn from the examples that you provide.

Using **regulation** skills as an example, the illustration shows the interconnection between the parent's resilience and the child's resilience. When a child sees a caregiver stay regulated and experiences the caregiver's support in helping to manage the child's own feelings, the child has a template to follow in the future.



Question 6: How can I help children who have experienced trauma, separation and loss to feel calm and safe?

When children feel safe and calm, we describe them as being **regulated**. Children who have experienced trauma, separation and loss often appear agitated or constantly in a state of alert. These children often are described as **dysregulated**. This is because their brains are wired to be

on a constant search for danger. Even though we might not perceive that anything dangerous is happening and even if we tell the child, “You are safe,” children who are dysregulated cannot calm themselves and relax. There are many ways that you can help children when they are dysregulated.

Co-regulation occurs when a parent responds to a child in a comforting, reassuring way. When you rock a crying baby, you are co-regulating. Your rhythmic, repetitive motion of rocking helps the baby to calm down. You are building an attachment with the baby as well when you respond in a comforting, reassuring way. To co-regulate with older children, you can do activities **side by side** (instead of face-to-face), such as going for a walk or riding in a car together. When a child is in a dysregulated, upset state of mind, it is important that you avoid getting into an argument even if the child tries to start one. You need to stay calm even if the child’s behavior *escalates* (becomes more agitated or angry). Keeping yourself calm and regulated during these situations can help the child to calm down. Remember that when **you** start to become agitated, irritated or angry, the child will follow your lead. This is why it is critical for the parent who is fostering or adopting to stay calm and regulated.

Over time, you can teach your child coping skills to use when the child becomes aware of starting to feel upset or overwhelmed. Teaching coping skills needs to be done in a fun way and at a time when the child is already calm. Some techniques you can teach your child include **belly breathing** (taking slow, deep breaths from the diaphragm), **heart rate regulation** (bringing the heart rate up and down) and **using the senses**. Examples of using the senses include smelling scented oils, such as lavender oil, which many people find calming, or concentrating on something calming such as watching a lava lamp or a fish tank. Find ways to practice these coping skills while having fun with the child in your care. Playing together is a great way to teach regulation while strengthening your relationship.

When children feel safe, they have greater ability to use many of the skills needed for resilience successfully. Felt safety often comes when children experience consistent boundaries, structure and routines. While you may not be thinking intentionally of taking these steps to help the child build resilience, know that what you do to provide a sense of security for the child ultimately will contribute to the child’s resilience.

Question 7: How can I support the child I am fostering or adopting to develop a healthy self-identity?

To develop a healthy sense of self, children need to know “where they have been.” In other words, they need to know their personal histories. This includes understanding important past events and having a connection to important people in their lives. Children who grow up surrounded by family members usually hear stories about them told time and time again. This retelling of stories gives a child a good sense of the child’s history and importance within the family. This is called a **claiming behavior** because it sends the message that the child has a strong place in the family. When children come into foster care, they don’t hear these stories as

often and don't see their family members as often, if at all. This is why it is important for parents who are fostering or adopting to help maintain their child's family connections. You can maintain a child's connections by supporting visits with the child's parents and talking with the child often about the child's family. As a parent who is fostering, you need to partner with the child's caseworker to identify which family member relationships should be maintained and what seems to be in the child's best interest.

Creating a **Lifebook** is another helpful way that parents who are fostering or adopting can support a child's development of a healthy self-identity. Because a Lifebook contains pictures and other important items, some persons might think of a Lifebook as a scrapbook; but it is much more. In addition to pictures and mementos, a Lifebook includes the child's personal writings and a record of activities the child has done with others. A Lifebook helps the child to explore thoughts and feelings about important events and persons. Some children have a Lifebook started for them as soon as they enter foster care, while others go through their whole foster experience without the benefit of this important personal story of life experiences.

If the child you are fostering or adopting has a Lifebook, it's helpful for you to review it with the child from time to time and to add new photos and descriptions of experiences that include your family. Children need to have documentation of their time spent in foster care, including memories, photos and stories. For some children, searching for information or visiting places such as the hospital where they were born or the house where they used to live, and taking a photo for their Lifebook, can be valuable. Prior life experiences are an important reason why a child whom you are fostering or adopting is living with you. They are also an important part of the child's development of personality, strengths, character and memories. Therefore, it is important that you not shy away from the child's history. If the child does not have a Lifebook or you would like to help the child build upon a Lifebook that the child already has, you can find great ideas by visiting the Child Welfare Information Gateway for links to resources for Lifebooks: [parenting/lifebooks/https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/adopt-parenting/lifebooks/](https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/adopt-parenting/lifebooks/).

You need to honor and to respect the child's family history while celebrating the child's current relationships.

Question 8: How can I help the child I am fostering or adopting to gain a healthy sense of self-worth?

Children who have good self-esteem feel safe and secure. They have an underlying sense that they have worth and value. Experiences of trauma, separation and loss can have a long-term, negative impact on a child's feelings of safety and security. Children who have had these experiences might believe they don't deserve or have the right to be happy like other children. Parents who are fostering or adopting can focus on creating an environment where a child in their care can start to feel safe and secure. As these feelings grow stronger over time, the child will begin to build a stronger sense of self-worth. Building a child's self-esteem can be

challenging. It requires much time, patience and love. Making positive statements to children about who they are, how interesting they are and how much you value them can help them to develop a positive sense of who they are inside. Making these kinds of positive statements can be hard to do when a child exhibits difficult or challenging behaviors. You will need to provide this reassurance regardless of the behavior. Loving a child for who the child is, without considering the child's behaviors, is the first key to helping the child develop a healthy sense of self. Successful experiences with others also will support a positive sense of self. Help the child in your home to build relationships with family members, peers and others in your community. This will help the child to feel a sense of connectedness and will support feelings of self-worth.

**Question 9: If the child I am fostering or adopting is struggling with emotions, how can I help?
To whom can I reach out for help?**

First, help the child to identify and to label the mixture of emotions that the child might be feeling. Then, when the child is feeling strong negative or positive feelings, help the child to express the emotions of the moment. One way to do this is to guess the emotion ("I wonder if you are a little sad.") until the child independently is able to identify the child's own feelings. Another helpful tool is an emotion chart that you can use with the child throughout the day to help identify the child's feelings. You can make a simple emotion chart by downloading or copying different emojis and labeling each feeling.

For older children, naming the emotion that they are feeling can be helpful. Children need to understand that feelings come and go throughout the day. When a person is upset, time can feel as if it were slowing down. You can benefit the child you are fostering or adopting by helping the child to understand that feelings do calm down after a bit. It's also helpful to teach the child activities or strategies to use that help with the process of calming down. Activities such as deep belly breathing, talking, walking and drawing all can help to shift a mood. After-school discussions between a parent and a child can be a great time to explore feelings that might have come up during the day. These discussions also provide a daily opportunity for you not only to help the child identify feelings but also to show that it is natural for feelings to come and go.

When you are looking for help, your foster care or adoption agency is a great place to start. Agency staff can provide guidance and support. They also can help you to find support groups, parent trainings, books and other free resources. Social media groups, conferences and web-based resources can help you to obtain more information and skills to meet the needs of a child who is struggling with emotions.

Family and individual therapies can be critical pieces of a child's healing from experiences of trauma, separation and loss. Because children who have experienced trauma and loss have unique needs, you need to look for therapists who are *trauma-informed* and *adoption-competent*. These therapists have special training and experience helping children and families formed through foster care and adoption. If you live in an area where there are no therapists

with this specialized training, you might find a therapist who is interested in getting the information and knowledge needed to work well with families formed through foster care or adoption.

Question 10: How can I stay calm when the child I am fostering or adopting is having a meltdown?

When a child is showing challenging behaviors or the behavior is escalating into a meltdown, nothing is more important than for the caregiver to stay calm and regulated. Remember that the most challenging behaviors in children who have experienced trauma, grief and loss are not intentional or purposeful. When you remember that these behaviors are happening because the child is not feeling safe, you will be better able to stay calm and to respond in helpful, positive ways. Parenting a child who has experienced trauma can be intense, stressful, frustrating and sometimes physically and emotionally draining; that's why self-care is so important for caregivers. If you do not make a serious commitment to self-care, you quickly will find yourself overwhelmed, burned-out, and ineffective.

If you are not doing well yourself, it is hard — some would say impossible — for you to support the recovery and healthy development of children who have experienced trauma. Although sometimes it seems impossible to find time for self-care, once you do take some time for yourself, you probably will realize that you are able to do other tasks more quickly and effectively. Your social support network is an important resource. You can strengthen your network by focusing on relationships in which you feel respected and appreciated. You also can strengthen relationships by accepting help from others. By accepting help from someone, you're letting that person know that you trust and respect that person's abilities. Keep building your network so you have multiple friends and connections to whom you can turn in different situations to get support for different needs.

In a crisis or confrontational situation, such as when a child is screaming at you or throwing things, you need first to *de-escalate* the crisis and to avoid harm to anyone. If harm is not about to happen, de-escalation will take patience on your part. Start by remaining calm, not engaging in the confrontation, keeping a respectful distance and being empathetic -- or just staying present but quiet. Make sure that your nonverbal messages are conveying calmness. For example, make sure your body language shows that you are calm by keeping your arms relaxed at your sides and your palms open. When a child's behavior is escalated, this is not the time to reason with the child or to talk about the consequences of the child's behavior. One technique that parents can use is called the 3 R's: Regulate, Relate and Reason. Before reasoning with a child, you need to make sure the child is regulated and calm. You might need to give the child physical and emotional space or to help the child de-escalate and to regulate the child's emotions (Regulate). Once the child is regulated then you should ensure that the child feels connected and supported (Relate). After the child is regulated and feels connected with you, it is important for you to help the child identify the feelings the child is experiencing and to validate them. For example, "I think you're disappointed that your friend couldn't come over. Is

that what you are feeling? What are other ways to express your feelings without yelling at me and punching the wall?" (Reason) Recognize that you might not always know what triggered the outburst; so, don't make assumptions. The goal is to create a relationship in which the child is comfortable letting you know how the child is feeling.

Question 11: What are ways to intervene when the child I am fostering or adopting becomes triggered or reactive?

Start by understanding the child's history and any needs the child may have or expressed in other homes. This can help you to set expectations appropriate for the child's level of ability. Parents who learn and understand about children's brain development and the impact that trauma has on how children develop, think and function usually are able to keep calm in the face of negative behaviors exhibited by the children they are fostering or adopting.

Children's behaviors can be *triggered* by sights, sounds, smells or interactions that bring up reminders of their trauma that are so powerful that the children feel as though they are reliving their original trauma. It is easier to prevent a trigger than to manage a child already triggered. Most children will not know what triggers their behaviors; they will need your help identifying their triggers. Triggers can be sudden memories (flashbacks), reminders of past trauma or the inability to manage "big" feelings. Shame is a negative reflection of how a person feels about oneself. An adult showing or expressing disappointment in a child could be a trigger for the child to feel immense shame. Children might fear losing face in front of others or might act out the frustration they feel because they do not understand what is expected of them. When children are not feeling well physically, they are more likely to become triggered because being unwell lowers their ability to manage stress. Feeling unwell can be related to lack of sleep, lack of good nutrition, headaches from eyestrain if the child needs glasses, not drinking enough water or other health issues.

Once you have a better idea of the child's triggers, you and the child can work together to create a plan of action to avoid triggers and to decide what to do to restore calm if the child becomes triggered. To make sure the plan of action will be ready when problems occur, it's important to practice the calming plans and techniques outside of a stressful event, when the child is calm and regulated. Talk openly with the child; let the child know that you want to be there to give support when the child is triggered. If the child is used to knowing that you are available for support and knows what this support is like, then the child might be more likely to accept your support. Practice calming techniques with the child by doing deep breathing together or coming up with code words or signal words that will give the child a way to ask for your help when triggered without alerting others.

Question 12: Are there ways outside of my individual interactions with the child I am

fostering or adopting that will help the child to build resilience?

Yes. Although the foundation of a child's resilience is built upon connection with a supportive caregiver, there are many other opportunities and experiences that can help to increase a child's resilience.

As children grow older, their social support often comes from persons outside of their family, such as friends and other persons who play important roles in their lives. These individuals provide enriching social experiences that add to a child's sense of belonging and identity. The influence of coaches, teachers and other adults provides children with additional role models who can demonstrate skills of resilience. When children take part in new or challenging activities, they also are putting their resilience skills to use and building confidence in their own abilities.

Honoring and recognizing unique components of a person's cultural background contribute to identity development and bring a sense of belonging and pride. If you have a different cultural background from the child, look for the differences and similarities that you can celebrate together. Also seek mentors for the child who can build the child's sense of cultural identity to support pride in who the child is and where the child has come from.

A supportive community is also essential for helping children as well as caregivers to maintain their resilience. Service providers who specialize in trauma-informed treatments help to support children and caregivers to increase their self-regulation skills and self-efficacy. Children and adults who participate in foster care or adoption support groups are strengthened by the relationships that they form with others who share common experiences and understand their unique situations. Engaging in faith-based or religious practices also can provide a source of external support to build resilience. For children and caregivers, it is important to remember that our own strength is enhanced by our connection with others. Resilience grows and children thrive in supportive communities.