

Socially Strong, Emotionally Secure

50 Activities to Promote

Resilience in Young Children

BY NEFERTITI BRUCE AND KAREN CAIRONE
with the Devereux Center for Resilient Children

Dedication

To Kevin, for helping me to learn the importance of teaching to the spirit of children

— NEFERTITI BRUCE

To Judy and Steve, my best role models for parenting and teaching

— KAREN CAIRONE

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About Devereux

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In 2009, the Devereux Center for Resilient Children (DCRC) was created to advance Devereux's commitment to primary prevention and promotion of resilience of all children. The DCRC encompasses the Devereux Early Childhood Initiative (DECI) as well as the emerging focus on school-age children.

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Introduction

Take a moment to think about how a mighty oak tree grows. A seed grows in rich soil and develops roots. Rain waters the seed and the sun shines on it. Over time, the tree grows strong and tall.

Now, consider how children grow, and in particular, how they develop socially and emotionally. When we plant healthy seeds and cultivate their roots properly, they grow up to be healthy socially and emotionally.

The famous poem from 1954 entitled, “Children Learn What They Live,” by Dorothy Louise Law Nolte, ends by saying, “If a child lives with fairness, he learns justice. If a child lives with security he learns to have faith. If a child lives with acceptance and friendship, he learns to find love in the world.” So, think about this... What are *you* helping your children learn?

Children can grow, discover, and learn best when they develop social and emotional skills early in life. Promoting optimal development of these skills, particularly in the early years, is important. The sooner we begin to make teaching these skills a priority, the better chance we have of helping children develop resilience.

Now more than ever, teaching must extend beyond the classroom. This resource book is designed to help in that effort. Each strategy and activity is designed for children ages three to eight, and offers a way to do the activity in both home and school environments. The goal is straightforward: To provide parents and teachers with simple activities that promote children’s social and emotional development and resilience.

What Is Social Development?

Social development involves learning to form and value relationships with others. First friendships and the development of healthy social skills go hand-in-hand in the early years. Teachers and parents alike can promote these important social behaviors in young children by helping them establish and maintain friendships.

What Is Emotional Development?

Emotional development is closely related to social development and refers to how a child feels about himself or herself, about the people in his or her life, and about the environment in which he or she plays and lives. Both positive and negative emotions are important. Teachers and parents can help children understand, identify, and deal with their strong emotions and feelings.



We think about resilience as having a “blanket in the back of your car.”

What Is Resilience?

Resilience is the ability to recover from or adjust to misfortune or change, bounce back, and overcome the odds. Resilient children often possess qualities that help them get along well with others and “go with the flow.”

Resilience is important for every child and adult, as we are all subject to the unknown; we cannot always anticipate when risk factors or stressful events will enter our lives. We think about resilience as having a “blanket in the back of your car.” You never know when you will use it, but it is good to know that it is there if you are ever faced with a situation or occurrence where you need it.

How Can You Help Children Develop Resilience?

We believe every adult can help children build strong protective factors and strengthen resilience. Protective factors serve as buffers or supports that, when present, increase the well-being of children even when they are under stress.

Let’s take a closer look at each of these important protective factors.

Attachment: The mutual, strong, long-lasting relationships between a child and significant adults such as parents, family members, and teachers. Children form strong attachments not only with their parents, but with other caring adults, including early childhood teachers and other adults with a consistent presence in their lives. The attachment bonds that children form in these early years often predict the quality of relationships they will have throughout life, as these early experiences become the model for future social interactions.

Initiative: The child’s ability to use independent thought and action to meet his or her needs. As children develop healthy initiative, they learn to work and play attentively, independently, and cooperatively. Strong initiative in the early years prepares children to safely, actively, and eagerly explore their worlds, providing more learning experiences and opportunities for optimal growth and development.

Self-Control: The child’s ability to experience a range of feelings and express them using the words and actions that society considers appropriate. This key protective factor helps children learn to control and regulate their own behavior and get along well with others. Children with healthy self-control in the preschool years typically have strong interpersonal qualities such as self-confidence and self-esteem.

Learning to handle frustration and stress in the early years will help prepare children for challenges in the learning environment as well as in social settings.

Why Resilience Matters

It is up to adults to provide children with the skills necessary to navigate successfully through life. When the learning environment and home are safe, warm, and organized places with consistency in the care provided, children are set up for success. When children know where to go, what to do, and who will take care of them, they are free to focus on learning and having fun! Focusing on the factors related to resilience will not only significantly increase children's resilience, but also it will make them more socially and emotionally healthy, and they will be ready for today, tomorrow, and beyond.

Meaningful Activities Are Powerful Teaching Tools

The strategies and activities in this book promote social and emotional development and resilience in young children in both school and home settings. These meaningful experiences will help build children's strengths in their most important and influential settings and with the adults who are most invested in them.

The strategies and activities in this book are organized into five chapters:

- ▶ Supportive, Caring Practices
- ▶ Home and School Partnerships
- ▶ Activities and Experiences
- ▶ Daily Routines and Transitions
- ▶ Play and Learning Environment

Supportive, Caring Practices—The relationships between children and adults in a learning environment, and among the children themselves, are the basis for building a safe, strong, and caring community in which everyone is accepted, respected, and comfortable. The activities in the Supportive, Caring Practices chapter focus on helping children develop the skills needed for building and strengthening relationships. When supportive interactions are high quality and well planned, children's bonds with others will grow in this caring and safe setting. Children will feel confident and ready to explore.

Home and School Partnerships—When all the adults in a child's life become partners, with the shared goal of working together to meet the child's needs, they set a wonderful stage for success. In the Home and School Partnerships chapter, strategies and activities create opportunities for sharing resources between home and school and learning about and respecting cultural and individual differences.





Activities and Experiences—To promote the social development, emotional development, and resilience of young children, activities and experiences should encourage critical thinking skills, the use of imagination, and creative expression. The activities and ideas in the Activities and Experiences chapter promote all these, plus open-ended thinking, physical activity, and social and emotional learning.

Daily Routines and Transitions—What we do both during and in between everyday routines really affects how children grow and develop. Children develop trust and a sense of what to expect next when daily routines are predictable. In the Daily Routines chapter, strategies and activities help establish and maintain a consistent, yet flexible, structure and schedule for children—a huge contributor to developing a sense of belonging and community, cooperative participation, and engaged learning.

Playing and Learning Environment—Children do not need lots of expensive toys, furnishings, or other items that often hinder growth and development instead of promote it. What they do need are well-designed spaces, both at home and at school, that allow them to grow and learn. In the Playing and Learning Environment chapter, strategies focus on creating environments that are physically and emotionally geared to maximize learning and personal growth.

How to Use This Book

As you use the activities in this book, the goal is to enjoy the children's company while promoting their social development, emotional development, and resilience. You can start at the beginning, the middle, or even the end. We suggest that you spend time reading each of the activities included to help you decide where to begin. We have included reproducible at-home activity pages to help reinforce skills that children learn in the classroom.

Remember, when doing ANY activity in your classroom or home, try viewing it through “social and emotional lenses” to see what skills you are building and supporting. When you consider the important areas of a young child's development, it is clear that the quality time you spend interacting with a child will promote resilience, initiative, attachment, and self-control in one way or another!

Certainly, no matter where you start, you and the child or children you nurture are in for a remarkable journey towards resilience. The result of this journey will be children who are happier, more cooperative, and, ultimately, more resilient.

Promoting Resilience Through Supportive, Caring Practices

1 CHAPTER

Supportive interactions occur every day when teachers eagerly greet children as they arrive in the classroom, offering loving hugs and big hellos. Supportive interactions also occur when family members engage children in conversation about how it feels to be upset or scared about changes. Supportive interactions are the basis for relationship-building, and relationships are the foundation for the warm and caring bonds that help both children and adults feel safe. Young children experience their world as an environment of relationships, and these relationships affect just about every aspect of development—cognitive, social, emotional, and physical.

Carrying out supportive interaction strategies is not difficult, but it must become intentional. Intentional strategies are thought out and planned in advance, helping adults be more prepared for and mindful of their efforts to prevent challenging behaviors and promote healthy social and emotional development. When we are not intentional in our planning, our activities can seem forced, rushed, and lacking in meaning and purpose.

What Research Says

Relationships are the “active ingredients” in healthy human development. At their best, they promote competence and well-being, individualized responsiveness, mutual action-and-interaction, and an emotional connection to another human being, be it parent, peer, grandparent, aunt, uncle, neighbor, teacher, coach, or any other person who has an important impact on the child’s early development.

In the words of the distinguished developmental psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner, *“Somebody’s got to be crazy about that kid. That’s number one. First, last, and always.”*

(National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004: Young Children Develop in an Environment of Relationships).

A few simple ideas to keep in mind include:

- ▶ **Listen attentively**—Young children are full of laughter, stories, anecdotes, and simple tales of their lives. When a child shares with you, lean forward and make eye contact, asking questions such as, “Wow, this is interesting, can you tell me more?”
- ▶ **Display unwavering, genuine care and compassion**—In the classroom, let the children know you are happy to be their teacher. Call or send notes to children who may be ill, celebrate significant family events along with the family, and work with diligence to create a classroom community where every child and family feels respected and welcome. Casual conversations, celebration of birthdays, comments on a new haircut, or warm thoughts after recovering from a bad fall can set the example of care that children can learn from. Encourage families to let their child know that they are loved.



- ▶ **Say it with a smile**—Often, it is not what you say but how you say it. Practice saying, “I care” by giving the child a “thumbs up” from across the room or saying, “You’re great just the way you are” by simply smiling at the child.
- ▶ **Mirror, mirror**—Help children find their strengths by mirroring back to them those things they do well, remembering to focus on both effort as well as end results. “Marcus, you have worked so hard on this puzzle, and now you have really got it!”

What's Ahead

In this chapter you will find everyday strategies that can be used to create strong supportive interactions and build three key social and emotional skills in children: initiative, attachment, and self-control.

When you use strategies that focus on supportive interactions, you support:

- ▶ **Children's initiative.** When children feel safe and cared for, this allows them to be risk takers, dreamers, and creative beings free to express themselves within safe limits set by those who love and care for them. In an environment rich in supportive interactions, children gain a love for learning.
- ▶ **Children's attachment.** Growth-promoting relationships are based on the continuous give-and-take between children and adults who can provide what nothing else in the world can offer-experiences that are individualized to each of the children's unique personality styles, are built on interests and capabilities, and that stimulate growth of the heart and the mind.
- ▶ **Children's self-control.** The warmth and support children receive influences the development of greater social competence, fewer behavior problems, and enhanced thinking and reasoning skills at school age.



10 Ways to Promote Resilience Using Supportive, Caring Practices

1. Help children learn the skills and behaviors used to play and learn with others.
2. Know what is developmentally appropriate for children, and maintain realistic expectations for each child as an individual.
3. Involve children in setting a few positively stated rules and guidelines.
4. Support children in building trusting relationships with caring adults.
5. Support children's growing independence and competence.
6. Help children understand their feelings and those of others.
7. Try to learn the reasons behind children's behavior, understanding that children will use challenging behavior as long as it continues to get them what they want or need.
8. Support cooperation, guiding children as they learn to take turns and work together.
9. Teach children problem-solving skills and encourage them to use their skills to resolve conflicts.
10. Create a safe, fun, and nurturing community of caring in which children can play, work, and learn.

Give Me a Hand

Helps children learn the skills and behaviors used to play and learn with others.

What Children Will Learn

This activity helps children start to recognize feelings in others and in themselves. This is the beginning of developing empathy. For children to fully understand the feelings of others, they need to be in tune with strong feelings in their own bodies. By helping give children some words to use in play situations, you are setting them up for more successful social and emotional interactions. Regularly talking about feelings and reviewing kind play words will help children on the journey to develop empathy, as well as helping them learn to become good friends to others.

Social and Emotional Skills Supported

Attachment, Initiative, Self-Control

Materials Needed

paintbrushes
washable tempera paint

What to Do

- ▶ Gather the children together and explain that you will be talking together about how it feels to work and play in friendly ways, and also how it feels when others don't play well together.
- ▶ Tell the children you are going to need their hands to help make this activity great!
- ▶ For each child, on the back of one hand, draw a happy face using the tempera paint and paintbrush. On the back of the other hand, draw a sad face.
- ▶ Remind the children to keep their hands away from their bodies and any items or materials nearby so that they don't get paint on themselves or anything else.
- ▶ Each time you describe a situation, ask the children to hold up the appropriate hand to show how they would feel. Here are some examples:

"How would you feel if your friend shared one of his cookies with you?"

"How would you feel if your friend invited you to her birthday party?"

NOTE: For a less "messy" variation, give the children two pieces of paper and invite them to create a happy face and a sad face using pens, markers, or crayons. Ask them to hold up the piece of paper with the face that matches the feeling.



Social & Emotional Lenses

Telling children to “use your words!” is often not enough; we need to help them learn the right words to use!



“How would you feel if your friend would not let you play with him?”

“How would you feel if you and your friends planted a garden together?”

“How would you feel if someone was teasing you?”

- ▶ Feel free to add other questions. Write down the children’s ideas on paper. You might create a chart with a smiley face on top of one column and a sad face on top of the other column. As you review each situation, write a few words from the children in the appropriate column.
- ▶ End this activity by explaining to the children that they have words they can use to help them play and learn with others. Here are a few simple suggestions:

May I play with you?

When you are finished, may I have a turn?

Please stop it. I don’t like it.

Can we take turns?

Do you want to play together?

Thank you for asking me to play. I want to finish this first.

I like this. Can we do it together?

DO THIS AT HOME

Give Me a Hand

Try this activity at home to reinforce what your child learned about recognizing his feelings and the feelings of others.

What Your Child Will Learn

This activity will help your child or children start to recognize feelings in others and in themselves. This is the beginning of developing empathy. For children to fully understand the feelings of others, they need to be in tune with strong feelings in their own bodies. By helping give children some words to use in play situations, you are setting them up for more successful social and emotional interactions. Regularly talking about feelings and reviewing kind play words will help your child or children on the journey to develop empathy, as well as helping them learn to become good friends to others.

Materials Needed

paintbrushes, magazine or book pictures of sad and happy children, washable tempera paint

What to Do

- ▶ On the back of one of your child's hands, draw a happy face using the tempera paint and paintbrush. On the back of the other hand, draw a sad face.
- ▶ Help your child think of situations with friends that might make everyone feel happy or sad. Ask your child to hold up the appropriate hand to show how he would feel in each situation.
- ▶ It may be useful to think of recent happenings in your child's life to use for this activity so that you can discuss his thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in more depth.
- ▶ As your child takes a guess at the feeling, remember that he is just starting to understand feelings. He may guess "happy" for a time that was "sad," but you can use that time to talk with him about the meaning of those feeling words.
- ▶ Brainstorm words and phrases together that children can use to help them play and learn together, and write them down. Here are some suggestions:
 - May I play with you?*
 - When you are finished, may I have a turn?*
 - Please stop it. I don't like it.*
 - Can we take turns?*
 - Do you want to play together?*
 - Thank you for asking me to play. I want to finish this first.*
 - I like this. Can we do it together?*
- ▶ Find magazine pictures or books of children with happy or sad faces, and help your child think of what might have happened in each situation. Work together to make up a pretend conversation for the sad faces, and then help your child think of a solution using the useful ideas that you've written down.

*You can download this activity and the other at-home activities in this book at www.centerforresilientchildren.org/SSES.

When We Were Little; Now That We're Big!

Helps adults learn what is developmentally appropriate for children and maintain realistic expectations for each child as an individual.

What Children Will Learn

Having the opportunity to reflect on what babies do, what we currently can do, and what we still hope to learn is a fun and insightful way for children to learn about the growth process. It is also a nice reminder for adults to celebrate every stage and milestone, knowing that there are always skills to be further developed, but making sure to reflect on how far each child has come.

Social and Emotional Skills Supported

Attachment, Initiative, and Self-Control

Materials Needed

When I Was Little by Jamie Lee Curtis (or similar story about growing up)

What to Do

- ▶ Ask the children to think about when they were babies. You might even ask each child to bring in a baby picture and take turns guessing which picture matches each of the children.
- ▶ Then, discuss as a group, “When you were a baby, what things did you probably like to do?” Make a list or draw pictures.
- ▶ Next, talk about what things babies cannot yet do, and are still learning.
- ▶ Now, talk about how old the children are today and ask the same questions: “What things do you like to do?” and “What are you still learning?”
- ▶ Talk about big brothers and sisters, older friends, and cousins. Are there things they can do now that you are still learning?
- ▶ Wrap-up with a story such as *When I Was Little* by Jamie Lee Curtis, which shares some of the fun stages of growth and development and also celebrates that we are continuing to learn and grow every day.



Social & Emotional Lenses

How quickly they grow! Know that every day is a gift and enjoy each stage!

DO THIS AT HOME

When We Were Little; Now That We're Big

Try this activity at home to reinforce what your child learned about the growth process.

What Your Child Will Learn

Having the opportunity to reflect on what babies do, what we currently can do, and what we still hope to learn is a fun and insightful way for your child to learn about the growth process. It is also a nice reminder for you to celebrate your child's every stage and milestone, knowing that there are always skills to be further developed, but making sure to reflect on how much your child has accomplished.

Materials Needed

photographs of your child at different ages, with descriptions of how old he was and what he was doing in each photograph

When I Was Little by Jamie Lee Curtis (or similar story about growing up)

What to Do

- ▶ Talk to your child about when he was a baby. Ask questions such as: "When you were a baby, what things did you probably like to do?"
- ▶ Next, talk about what things babies cannot yet do, and are still learning.
- ▶ Now, talk about how old your child is today and ask the same questions: "What things do you like to do?" and "What are you still learning?"
- ▶ Show your child the pictures and see if he can match each age and description to the picture. Ask questions to see if your child remembers the event.
- ▶ End with a story such as *When I Was Little* by Jamie Lee Curtis, which shares some of the fun stages of growth and development and also celebrates that we are continuing to learn and grow every day.

*You can download this activity and the other at-home activities in this book at www.centerforresilientchildren.org/SSES.

President for a Day!

Involves children in setting a few positively stated rules and guidelines.

What Children Will Learn

Rules help keep us safe and help us have fun while exploring and playing. When children have the chance to be a part of making the rules, they will feel more empowered and eager to follow them! When children take care of themselves, their friends, and the environment around them, they are helping foster the best opportunities for everyone to develop social and emotional skills.

Social and Emotional Skills Supported

Initiative, Self-Control

Materials Needed

crayons, markers, pencils, paper
pictures of the White House
other items related to the presidency

What to Do

- ▶ Talk with the children about the role of the President of the United States, and the role we play as citizens of this country. Help the children learn how to make “big decisions” and decide what rules they would make if they were President for a Day!
- ▶ Show pictures as you talk about the President. Encourage the children to tell you what they know about presidents.
- ▶ Explain to the children that one of the big responsibilities a president has is to help make rules (also called laws).
- ▶ Ask the children what new rules and laws they would make if they were elected. Guide the children to come up with rules that fall under these three main categories:
 - ◀ take care of ourselves
 - ◀ take care of our friends
 - ◀ take care of the place we live and learn
- ▶ Write their individual responses on paper under the caption, “If I Were President for a Day!”