



Published on *kids.now* (<http://www.kidsnowcanada.org>)

[Home](#) > [Healthy Thinking](#) > The 4 Rs: reading, writing, rithmetic & resilience...

# The 4 Rs: reading, writing, rithmetic & resilience...

By Michael Ungar, Ph.D.

Most of us want to believe that if our children master the three Rs—reading, writing and arithmetic—they're guaranteed a good future. While there is a connection between how well a child does in grade three and how much he'll earn over his or her lifetime, a child needs a lot more than just these few skills to thrive. When life knocks our children off their feet, it's resilience, the fourth "R", that will predict how well they do.

Resilience is tricky to define because it involves all those common and not so common characteristics of a child, a child's family and community, government policies, and even the child's culture, that make it possible for the youngster to cope when life dishes up one problem too many. Resilience is how a child uses his or her many strengths during a crisis. It's the child's ability to bounce back from adversity, such as the taunts of a relentless schoolyard bully, the loss of a parent, or peer-on-peer violence.

We might also say a child is resilient if she has a positive relationship with a grandparent, coach or other caring adult role model. Or if she has a place of worship to attend, a sense of her cultural heritage, and a story of her people that she can proudly tell.

## SEVEN WAYS TO NURTURE RESILIENCE

Watching children grow up and overcome great challenges, I've learned seven lessons that our children can teach us about what they need to be resilient.

**LESSON 1:** *I know where I belong.* After Wanda and Peter's divorce, their son Tony managed just fine. He missed not having his mother and father in the same house, but he still had lots of great relationships with adults and kids at his school, on his hockey team and when he visited his grandparents, uncles and cousins. Children like Tony have taught me they can weather family separations as long as other relationships remain stable. A resilient child needs a community where he feels he belongs.

**LESSON 2:** *I want to do it myself!* According to 10-year-olds like Caitlin, a little say over our lives goes a long way. As Caitlin became progressively more visually impaired because of a genetic disorder, her parents insisted she change schools. However, it was Caitlin who made the choice to stay put and fight for a learning support worker to help her. Children like Caitlin who have some say over the big decisions that affect them do much better when coping with life's big challenges.

**LESSON 3:** *I'm here and I matter.* After moving to a new community, five-year-old Tristan insisted on wearing his Halloween moose costume to school, to church and to bed every day for six weeks. A little inconvenient, but Tristan had found a way to get himself noticed and to tell everyone, "Hey, I'm here!" Eventually the moose costume came off...just in time for the Santa hat. All children need powerful identities if they are going to feel good about themselves when life circumstances make them feel insecure.

**LESSON 4:** *I need a warm bed, a hot meal, and a safe school.* Even a delinquent 12-year-old like Campbell, whom I met after he'd run away from home, can be enticed to his parents' dinner table by the promise of a good meal and the security of knowing he's safe when he's at home. A child who gets his basic needs met is one that is going to feel good about himself, even if he never says thank you to the adults in his life who make him feel that way.

**LESSON 5:** *Don't tell me I can't do that!* Let's hear it for strong-willed little girls who remind the boys that they can all play the same games. Let's celebrate the child who challenges racial and ethnic stereotypes. I am awed by children who fight for their rights and social justice for all. This skill is an important one if a child is to be resilient.

**LESSON 6:** *I am proud to be like my grandparents.* Eight-year-old Amber was embarrassed to wear her traditional Pakistani clothes to school the day her grandfather drove her. She did it to please him, but was dreading what her classmates would say. She needn't have worried. That afternoon she proudly told her grandfather the other girls had thought she looked like a storybook princess. Offering children an opportunity to feel proud of their culture and heritage is a buffer against threats to their self-esteem.

**LESSON 7:** *I can contribute.* Five-year-old Alicia stopped her temper tantrums about the same time her mother asked her to start taking some genuine responsibility for her baby brother. A child who feels she belongs and can make a contribution to another's welfare at home, at school, or within a faith community, is a child who is likely to feel good about herself.

As these seven lessons tell us, resilience isn't just something inside a child, it's something that we as caregivers make possible. After all, few children avoid life's challenges entirely. Eventually, they'll have a problem to overcome. Maybe it's a learning disability, a family break-up, a parent's death, violence in their community or at their school, a move to a strange new place, emotional put-downs, or a care-giver's neglect. Resilience is more than a child's strengths. We know that a child who has lots of good things to say about himself, feels loved and has that love shown through structure and expectations, is less likely to grow up and do drugs or become sexually active early. As parents, teachers, and other important adults in children's lives, we all play a role in helping them build this resilience. It is ultimately these important connections that lay the foundation for children to protect themselves against whatever adverse circumstances life may throw at them.

*Michael Ungar, Ph.D. is a family therapist and author of books for parents such as **We Generation: Raising Socially Responsible Kids and Too Safe For Their Own Good: How Risk and Responsibility Help Teens Thrive.** He is an internationally recognized expert on resilience among youth and families, and leads a study that looks at how young people thrive in more than a dozen countries.*

Healthy Thinking

© kids.now. All Rights Reserved  
Charitable registration # 868168113RR0001

- [Home](#)
- [Contact Us](#)
- [Newsletter](#)
- [Site map](#)
- [Privacy Policy](#)

**Source URL:** <http://www.kidsnowcanada.org/4-rs-reading-writing-rithmetic-resilience>