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Hello,

I'm happy today to be addressing the topic of "Resiliency". As a mental health professional, one of the most satisfying parts of my job is helping empower parents to feel competent and successful.

Coming from my work in DASI's shelter for battered women, and in my practice I have found helping parents to be effective with their difficult/struggling children to be my particular interest.

Many of Sussex County's children are coming from homes with high-stress factors. What can we do as professionals to help? I'm going to address an area that I believe is often misunderstood.

Definition:

"Resilience' is the process of managing stress and functioning well, even when faced with challenges, adversity, and trauma."

Let's just look at some of these areas of challenge....

Societal issues: poverty, racism, unemployment;

Traumatic events: accidents, natural disasters, job loss, domestic violence, crime;

Personal issues: substance abuse, other addictions;

Unexpected events: having a special needs child, a death in the family, being homeless.

How parents respond to these stressors is the key for the family.

The Center for the Study of Social Policy outlines 5 protective factors for strengthening families:

Parental Resilience

Social Connections

Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development

Concrete Support in Times of Need

Social-Emotional Competence of Children

Being able to identify the different issues that are undermining the health of your family is really important.

For instance, if you don't know that you're in an abusive relationship and that the abuse is not your fault, you won't know to look for a Domestic Violence agency to help you. Knowing where to find resources for help is a large part of resiliency. Being able to identify your problem, knowing that there are resources, knowing where to go to access those resources is a huge component of resiliency. But first you have to take the step forward out of shame and blame. Feeling like it's their own fault can paralyze an individual into a state of "learned helplessness". As professionals, there are ways we can empower our clients.

Conditions of adversity and challenge can cause a person to feel like they're in an emotional tornado. Hard to tell which way is up. Hard to get your feet on the ground and hard not to let your emotions sweep you away. Our autonomic nervous systems get involved through our fears and trigger off a physiological response that we may not be aware of. As a parent, we can be swept away by these reactions. This is when we do things that we may be sorry for later on, and we look back and say, "I was not in my right mind."

In order to be resilient, a parent needs to know when their emotions are deregulating them to the point that their parenting will be effected and they need to have tools to calm themselves down. Otherwise kids get swept up in the tornado, or maybe one tornado meets another and you have disaster, melt-down, and damage to repair and heal from.

One of the catch-22's of these difficult situations for parents is that on top of their own painful struggle, their child is also struggling.

Children pick up on the tension and fear in their parents. They take it on as their own.

What does a struggling/insecure child look like?

- They may be hard to put to sleep at night;
- They may not eat well and fight you at the dinner table;
- They may have many illogical fears;
- Little things may set them off;
- They may have “disrespectful” behavior;
- They may not get along well with other kids;
- They may embarrass you in front of others;
- They may get into trouble in school;
- They may make you doubt yourself as a parent.

Consequently, as a person dealing with tremendous adversity at times, on top of it all, you feel like you can't even be a good parent - because look at your child's behavior!

For most parents, when they see their child's bad behavior they say to themselves, “I have to put a lid on this. This could get out of control. What if he/she thinks he can act this way and it's OK? What happens when they're a teenager?” Their fears take off into the future imagining the worst for their child. The urge then is to quash the rebellion through punishments or threats. Often that is just what family and friends are urging them to do also. “If you were only more consistent, you give in too often.” “Take more things away, then they'll learn.”

Our children are the most important thing to us and we all want them to be successful and happy as adults. The stakes are very high. The sad thing is that, this traditional parent response to the surface behavior more often than not is unsuccessful with children in high-stress environments.

The point that's being missed here is that bad behavior is merely a symptom of a deeper problem.

Children know what good behavior is, they know what bad behavior is. This is not rocket science. But something is getting in the way. High stress environments cause physiological dysregulation. Enough pressure in the volcano and it will blow. Children need to be taught to watch their bodies and recognize when they need to find a way to calm down.

What the child needs more than anything is for the adult to get on his side and “play detective” and be curious about what caused the “melt-down”. Someone who can help them learn to calm themselves down, until they can figure out what happened, until they are in their “right mind”. At that point, and only then, will solutions to the problem emerge.

When I sit with parents who are painfully struggling with doubts about their parenting, I see one of my primary jobs to be to help them focus on what they are doing right. I want them to know that their child may be acting out at home, but not because they're doing something wrong as a parent. If they've made their home a safe place for their child to have all their feelings, even the negative ones, then they've done something right. Then the challenge becomes how to channel these feelings in non-destructive ways.

Helping parents be ready for after-school melt-downs with ways that their child can express their emotions and release their body tension can help the parent feel more in control and proactive, as well as help the child feel understood. The child gets the message that even when they are out of control and don't understand why, their parent will be there to help them through it and out the other side.

Re-framing this can be tremendously empowering for the parent who feels that his child's bad behavior reflects poor parenting skills. Teaching the parent Emotional First Aid and giving them a toolbox to use can start to build successes. This then helps the child feel more secure and safe, helps him to learn self-regulation skills and enables him to be better able to behave appropriately.

Many schools and organizations are bringing to us techniques and protocols that introduce the concept of Mind/Body awareness. Children can be taught deep breathing and mindfulness. Yoga and other body work is bringing in a deeper awareness of our bodies and how important they are to our physical but also our mental health. Teaching parents to partner with their child in learning how to listen to our bodies and take care of ourselves with Emotional First Aid can improve the parent/child relationship and help the child develop skills that can last a lifetime.

This positive cycle lifts the family upward as they become more and more resilient.