

Lifestyle

# The Advertiser

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## The latest word in parenting

- by: Liz Walsh
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Author Shelley Davidow says a resilient child is a happy child. Picture: Thinkstock

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**PARENTING is a field dominated by buzz-phrases: helicopter parenting, tiger mums, self-regulation, positive discipline. But there is a new buzzword emerging; one that is**

appealing and enticing for its promise of happy, grounded children.

### **Resilience.**

*Noun.* **1.** The ability of a substance or object to spring back into shape; elasticity. Flexibility, pliability, suppleness, plasticity, elasticity, springiness, spring, give; more durability, ability to last, strength, sturdiness, toughness, strength of character, strength, toughness, hardiness.

**2.** The capacity to recover quickly from difficulties; toughness.

Such is its appeal, late last year the Victorian government announced it would task University of Melbourne experts with developing a new program to teach children how to be resilient – to be rolled out in state primary and secondary schools from mid-2014.

It is not just a case of kids needing to toughen up. Stress is part of life – and kids need to recognise that – but unnecessary stress needs to be reduced.

Shelley Davidow is a teacher, author and trained facilitator in restorative practice (a social science that aims

to build healthy communities). Her book, *Raising Stress-Proof Kids: Parenting Today's Children for Tomorrow's World*, released this month, details ways in which parents can help their children become more resilient.

It all comes down to, Davidow maintains, kicking stress out of lives, despite the fact that stress has become such a common curse of the Western world.

"Heart disease is the number one killing disease in the Western world... and the link between stress and heart disease is a well-established one," the teacher of 17 years, says.

"In my teaching profession, I see kids so stressed out that very often they would say they would rather die than fail an exam.

"I've come more and more to see how we've created, as a society, this invisible highway to success where there is a finish line that we draw, around the time a kid is 18, and then as teachers and parents we goad and cajole and encourage our children to push themselves to this finish line, and the finish line is all about academic success.

"We forget in the process that these kids may well be paying for this race to this imaginary finish line with their health."

At its core, Davidow says, *Raising Stress-Proof Kids* details the unhealthy and unnecessary stresses of our educational system and our outdated habits as parents, all of which are affecting children physiologically, cognitively and emotionally.

"We don't have to create this incredible stress program that we have our children in right now," she says. "When I talk to 13-year-olds and I ask them what their most significant cause of stress is, most of them will say school. Why? What are we doing as teachers that is causing this?"

"The more conscious parents become about small things they can do to alleviate or mitigate the effects of stress and the more we can inform our kids and allow them to understand what happens when they're stressed and what they can do about it, the more we can avoid this picture that seems to be developing of our advanced Western world that is stressing itself to death."

Davidow is South African, and uses a local metaphor to explain modern-day stress. "If you're being chased by rogue elephants, it's fantastic that you have a fight-or-flight system, because all the blood runs away from limbs and you can run and escape," she explains. "The trouble is, today, we don't know the difference between a rogue elephant and an upcoming exam.

"My premise in *Raising Stress-Proof Kids*, is that we absolutely do not have to be in a chronically stressed-out situation and we don't have to create that for our children. And I think we do create it and so much of it is unconscious; we just think that stress is a necessary part of life.

"Often, I think people glorify it: 'Oh, I'm so stressed'. And that some people think they're better than the rest of us because they are near break-down point with stress, I just think it's an unhealthy attitude and I don't think it serves our children well."

Davidow knows – as do we all – that stress is an everyday, ordinary thing. It is there, fluttering away in the background every day of our lives. It's how we deal with stress that is the key.

"Let's make our kids resilient, so when the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune do come at them, they'll catch them and won't get stabbed by them or knocked over," Davidow says. "We need to make children resilient against the things that make our hearts race and flood our bodies with stress hormones.

"We want them to be resilient so that when big things happen, they can handle it."

Sue Cutbill is the founder and owner of NSW-based business Kids Exercise, a company that specialises in unique recreational and exercise programs for kids.

She says outdoor activities and resilience in children go hand-in-hand.

“Being active, being outdoors, gives kids confidence – first of all in their own abilities. Being outdoors is very grounding,” she says.

“They end up having a whole load of endorphins released and feeling really good about themselves. That is one of the major factors in resilience – feeling good about yourself and your abilities.”

She has drawn up a list of nine tips to encourage resilient children and, in turn, reduce incidences of schoolyard bullying.

“Allowing your kids to have disappointments is super important,” Cutbill says.

“A lot of parenting these days seems to be about avoiding disappointments at all cost. But unless you have disappointments, how do you know how to deal with them? If kids haven’t been given those skills, then when something happens, their whole world falls apart.”

Cutbill has personal experience with it,

too. Her now 16-year-old son Tim was physically and emotionally bullied in Year 5, to the extent where the family decided to move schools.

“Bullying happens all through life now, through school, at university and in the workplace,” she says.

“As parents, we really have to set up and instil in our kids that doing that behaviour to someone is not OK... for example, at home, I do not tolerate name-calling.

“But it was also about teaching him how he packaged himself... he’s not strange or weird, he’s him.

“Now he’s a self-assured, resilient boy.”

Davidow says there are ways parents can make their children resilient against day-to-day stress – and it starts in the home.

“If there’s an argument between two siblings, the normal reaction is to be reactive: ‘Don’t do that to your little brother, he’s smaller than you’.

“Instead the reaction should be: ‘You’ve hurt your brother, now we need to go and find something that will make it all better because he’s crying. “We need to make our kids equal participants in solving problems that arise. As parents we need to not have a gut reaction to a situation, but a carefully thought-through one.”

This means parents must maintain “sainthood” at all times. Being stressed around children has a direct impact on them, she says.

“Parents are not born, they are made, and the book honours that with some tools that could be really helpful.

“It’s not about avoiding stress at all, it’s about managing so you don’t create an overactive stress-response system.

“If you stress kids when they are little they develop an overactive stress response – and that leads to anxiety and all kinds of other things in adults.

“And apparently in Australia, a quarter of the population is suffering from anxiety, in a really, really safe, amazing country. It’s astonishing.

“If we haven’t gone: ‘Oh my god’, every time our child has dropped a bottle of milk on the floor – that overactive response – then when they get out into the real world and meet real stresses, they’ll deal with it, they’ll cope with it, they’ll be emotionally balanced.

“They’ll find ways to cope, rather than going for drugs or becoming alcoholic or succumbing to heart disease.

“It’s not about avoiding stress and meditating on a high mountain. There is always sickness, and life always chucks you some big things; you can’t choose what’s going to come your way, but you can be mindful as to

how you respond.”

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Self esteem is the more important trait as it encompasses resilience, confidence and a strong sense of self. A person with excellent self esteem is comfortable within their skin, is not out to attract attention or prove anything, and is drawn to people who are equally as functional. Children with good self esteem tend not to be victims of bullying either (are a bad target for the bully) and generally have good supportive relationships all round. Helping your child achieve this however is what has parents stumped, particularly if they themselves have personality problems or issues of their own.

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