

“Schools will fix it!”

For a teacher, it feels like this is the attitude society has around every “issue” that pops up. Cyber safety? Schools will fix it. Understanding your sexuality? Schools will fix it. Environmental sustainability? The obesity crisis? Mental health? Digital addiction? The list of “issues” is endless and are schools are trying hard to get across them all. But the general feeling among teachers is that we’re doing too many things and none of them well.

Now don’t get me wrong, I’m not suggesting these issues aren’t important. They are. And education is certainly the answer. Oprah always says “when you know better you do better”. But seriously... it’s time we asked: who is responsible for all this educating?

As a teacher myself, I have to confess I’m tired of this “schools will fix it” mentality. When do parents “fix it”? When is our community expected to step up? These issues don’t belong exclusively to schools, they’re challenges for our entire society. They say it takes a village to raise a child, so where is everyone?

Let’s consider the idea of resilience. It’s a classic example of a “school will fix it” issue, falling beneath the broader theme of mental health and well-being.

Now, there was a time when I’d often say to my students “too bad, so sad”. It was always said gently and lightly and always related to the mini-adversities of school life: not being line leader, not being chosen to speak at assembly, not being partnered with your BFF. “Too bad, so sad” wasn’t something I said to be flippant. It was an attempt to build emotional resilience; that ability to survive life’s challenges and move on. But, one day, the Principal told me I had to stop saying it. A parent had made a complaint. Apparently ‘too bad, so sad’ was a “brutal response” to a child who was already upset because they’d missed out on the last muffin at the tuckshop.

Brutal? I’m not sure! But here’s the thing: a child who misses out on the last muffin at tuckshop needs to understand that “that’s life”. And the student who gets “told off” by their teacher for incomplete homework needs to accept responsibility and the accompanying consequence

The students we teach and the children we’re raising are going to have to face the real world at some time. They’re going to experience feelings of disappointment, frustration and upset throughout the course of their life. As parents and educators, we cannot – and we should not – continually rescue them from potential hurts and harm. If they’re constantly rescued they’ll never learn to draw on their own resilience.

Resilience doesn’t mean abandoning our children or asking them to detach from their feelings. Resilience is about putting life’s everyday events and adversities onto a scale of importance. We need to show our children that certain moments are inevitable and frustrating, but in order to succeed in this world, we need to move on.

Right now, we're educating and parenting in a highly child-centred society. It's almost like our kids are being encouraged to swagger around the place like the world owes them something. As parents we're nursing our children's hurts as though they're truly suffering some kind of hardship. When I think back to that parent who described my words as brutal, I think she genuinely believed that she was being a loving, supportive parent. Trouble was, she was loving on her kid so much, she wasn't allowing the child any room to grow. Imagine what that child might have gained from their traumatic tuckshop experience if their parent had said: Hey mate, it's okay. I missed out on a great car parking spot today. Life can be brutal, but we're strong enough to manage it.

I think it might be time that we take a step back from this child-centred approach to parenting and ask ourselves if it's really working for us. Are we doing more harm than good when we try to protect our children from experiences of failure, frustration, disappointment and struggle?

When our littlest learners first arrive at school, they should already know what it feels like to lose when they play a game. They should be familiar with the experience of being told no. They should be aware that adults provide boundaries of behavioural expectations and consequences. And they shouldn't be terrified, shocked or belligerent when a teacher gives direction on a task.

What teachers are noticing though is that many students are arriving at school ill-equipped to face even the most common, everyday challenge. A knotted shoelace, a tricky problem or a firm word from the teacher will see many kids sulking and crying. They're rushing home or (when they're older) to their phone, to tell their tale of hardship to sympathetic parents. Teachers are having to teach skills of resilience that would best be developed with parents and caregivers. And, as part of this "schools will fix it" mindset, teachers (and schools) are dedicating entire lessons (and programmes) to managing feelings of disappointment, anger and frustration. It's like our kids need Resilience 101 as a side-order to their over-sized serve of mainstream curriculum.

School shouldn't be the first time our children are required to draw on their resilience. And it's important that our children experience moments of challenge and adversity under the loving, supportive care of their parents. They need to first develop this critical skill of resilience with you. As a parent you can coach them through difficulty and help them discover that they can overcome adversity and even triumph from the experience.

So what might this look like?

Stop letting your child win the board game! They need to experience loss. (But don't get so competitive you beat them ten times in a row! That's harmful in different ways!)

Resist the temptation to rescue them when they're going to make a mistake. They learn from mistakes.

Let them play the way they want to play. Don't bullet-proof their experiences. Free play is where they learn problem-solving, risk-taking, co-operation and... resilience.

Give them time to do things for themselves. Let them dress themselves, pack their bag, do their laces. I know sometimes we're racing against the clock, but these moments of 'life skills' are crucial for our kids to develop persistence, mastery and resilience!

Give your children responsibilities. If they can make their bed, unpack the dishwasher or feed the cat, then the expectation should be that they do it. This gives them a chance to be contribute, to manage time and to toil at something.

And support teachers as they help your child grow into the best person they can be. When your child is asked to resubmit a piece of work, the teacher isn't picking on them – they're challenging them to do better. When a teacher corrects behaviour with a firm voice, they're not being 'mean', they're trying to raise standards. When your child comes home with stories of injustice, don't rush in to seek recourse. Maybe there's a lesson in resilience or patience or manners just waiting for a parent to lovingly uncover. And understand that 'too bad so sad' might just be a teacher's way of saying Hey little one – you got this.

Author: Gabbie Stroud