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Presentation Transcript
Raising Resilient Children
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A friend recently asked me if I would present something about how to help children become stronger – able to face the hardness of life, more resilient. While we have given a couple of series on parenting that covered this topic, now is a good time to focus specifically on parenting for resilience, due to all the pressures and stresses on us recently. I say that because of the current national unrest and because scripture admonishes us to be prepared for all eventualities.

Let's ask this question first: What makes for a resilient human being? What does it look like? I'm going to give you some examples, so that you can kind of understand, from my perspective, how this all works.

A woman called me one day looking for a counselor for her son. When her son arrived, I was astonished. He was 6'7" and had to weigh at least 300 pounds. He was an exterior lineman for a university football team. Of course, though he was twenty years old, his mother came with him. He was depressed. College was too hard. People expected him to work and be responsible for himself. The only part of his life where he felt good was football. It was relatively easy to knock the smaller boys around. He didn't have to work hard to be good at it – at least, at that level. This young man did not last long in therapy. It was too hard, he told me. His parents had taught him that he deserved ease in his life. They babied him, coddled him, buffered him from his mistakes, taught him that he was better than others, and was entitled to a good life – an easy life, filled with success without effort, and approval no matter what he had done.

One of the evidences of that was the call from his mother. When I found out her son was not fourteen or fifteen years old – or sixteen – I was surprised that she even called. And when I suggested to her, on the phone in that first call, that she give her son my phone number, and tell him to call me, she said, "Oh, he would never do that." So there she is, running interference for him. She didn't mean that he *wouldn't*. It wasn't that he was rebellious. She meant that he *couldn't*. He was incapable of it. But I don't think she understood that she had contributed in a major way to his crippling.

By way of contrast, I received a call from a fourteen-year-old girl some time back. She wanted to make an appointment for therapy. She was the youngest person who has ever called me on her own to ask for help. She had some issues. She told me she was having panic attacks. She was cutting herself. She had pretty bad insomnia. Some of the diagnostics revealed that she was somewhat depressed. But there was something about her that set her apart.

In our first session, she would look me in the eye and smile at me. There was no fear, no doubt, no apprehension. When I later talked to her parents, I saw that they gave her a lot of responsibility to take care of herself. The story was that she could make the call because she was going to have to work with the therapist. And she agreed to that. She was staying home all day by herself to do her online school work. I've known college people that couldn't do that. She was getting As in all of her classes, too, so she knew how to work hard. And despite her problems, her sense of self was healthy. Now, when I say, "sense of self," I don't mean self-esteem. Self-esteem is something we try to do to boost people up. This is how she believed *she is* – her sense of self. She believed that she could handle her own problems. And we can see that she isn't perfect. I'm not talking about being perfect. I'm talking about who she is at base. She knew she had problems, too, but she was going to conquer these problems. Now that's a resilient child.

Here's my final example: I had a discussion with a fellow church member some years ago. He told he had been a door gunner on a helicopter in Vietnam. He said he had killed people with his machine gun, and people on the ground were doing their best to try to kill him. He'd been in three helicopter crashes in which he feared for his life. And after he told this story, he mentioned that he'd never lost a night's sleep over any of it and was curious why not.

I asked him about his childhood. He told me he grew up on a farm. He had a brother and sister who were close to him in age. He said his siblings and his parents spent a lot of time together as a family, working on the farm. He said his parents were loving and interested in them and their hopes and goals, but also gave them a lot of freedom to make their own choices. He said he and his siblings did well at school with grades. They were popular and they were all good at sports. And I said, "Oh! The ideal childhood!" And he said, "Pretty much. Yes!" And I said, "Well, that's the answer to your question. You learned that if you worked hard, you could be successful. You learned that you were loved and valued by the way you were treated by your family. You learned that life can work out, if you stay with it. And you brought those values with you to Vietnam."

Contrarywise, we know, from a ton of research, that people who grew up unvalued, neglected, living in danger perhaps tend to be susceptible to PTSD in a way that more secure people are not. And he was a secure person. Now he wasn't a perfect person. I'm not saying that every aspect of a person's life is perfect when they have this kind of beginning. It just means that how they see themselves is that they're loved and worthwhile. It doesn't mean that they're better than anybody else – superior. It doesn't mean they have anything to boast about. It just means that they feel okay, if we can use that term.

I also think that there may be a slight genetic bump that way for some people. If your parents are pretty confident and calm, the chances that you might inherit some of that is there. And, if they're anxious, you may get a little bit of that, too. But that wouldn't be the major part of the picture in anybody's case. We know that epigenetics is just a slight inclination.

And then, there's the faith issue to consider, which also affects what we believe about ourselves and our situation. So, of the three examples I've given, which ones remind us of how God acts and how He is? Well, the girl and the door gunner, right? I mean, God is not afraid of His own shadow. So, when we talk about developing children who are resilient, what we're really talking about is teaching them how to be Godly people – to be like God, as best they can. And this has a lot to do with how they see themselves in the world around them.

So here's what I know about that in condensed form. Early nurturing has a lot to do with it. "How do help our kids be this way?" people ask. Well, some people are already past early nurturing, but this is vital. The Swiss psychologist, Jean Piaget, made an observation. He said that what a child learns about parents and about themselves, as related to God, is eventually transferred to God later. I have heard many people say that their view of God is negative because of the way their parents treated them. Have you heard that said? I hear it a lot.

So, Jean Piaget was right. It *does* get transferred to God later. And that means that God has given parents a very serious, vital mandate to bring their children up in His kind of nurture and admonition. In Ephesians – I think it's 6 – Paul told fathers to bring their children up in the nurture and the admonition of the Lord – that is, the training and the care. And, of course, what happens first in life is the most impactful. Most people think that isn't how it works. But it is! A child's first experiences teach them a very great deal about themselves. And when a baby is nurtured by a gentle, calm, loving parent, they believe, from the beginning, they are lovable, loved and safe. The nurturing teaches that. So this makes it easier in life, if you have that kind of upbringing, to take risks, to reach out, to overcome obstacles and to have faith.

Would you think that David, as a teenager, was a resilient child? We're told that he attacked a giant and he prevailed. And he said that was because God was with him. So, he sees himself as *with God* – God with him – and as long as God is there, he is not afraid. And that's because God had been with him from his youth. He recounted the story of how God helped him kill a lion and a bear that was attacking his flock. He believed – and it was true – that God had been with him from his youth. And He had – directly – but also He had been with David through David's parents.

People have told me that a doctor told them to put their child, who might have been inconsolable, in a car seat, and then put them in a room and just shut the door, because there wasn't anything to do for them. Now, let me ask you this question: If you were suffering a terrible unrelenting pain or a terrible fear, would you want your caregivers to isolate you or to be present with you in your fear and agony? – even though they couldn't do anything about it, but just to be there with you.

Think about Job's friends who came to be with him while he was suffering. They knew a lot more about taking care of each other back then than we do today.

When we don't know what to do as a parent, the best thing to do is to be close. Listen to something that the apostle Paul says. He is portrayed as a somewhat gruff person, and we think maybe he was not married, and we know that, at one point in his life, he was pretty much of an extremist. But here's what he says in 1 Thessalonians 2:7 – talking to the people in this congregation:

1 Thessalonians 2:7 – *But we were gentle among you – like a nursing mother taking care of her own children. So being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God, but also our own selves because you had become very dear to us.*

To Paul, it wasn't just about traveling around in boats or around the Mediterranean, and getting to as many congregations as he could. It was about *connecting* with the people.

We've lost so much in our society. I was reading a quote by Martin Luther King recently. He said – and I don't have the quote, so I'm just paraphrasing it – we need, as a society, to start moving away from things and possessions and toward people. See, he was looking way past the current racial situation, way past politics to where we needed to go and what would solve the problem. It wasn't more legislation. That may help people start moving the right way, but that's not really the problem, so it can't be the solution. He said the problem is about relationships, not stuff. If we could all just get that, then there would be no racial issues, no political issues, no family problems. We'd just be one big united group of happy people – everyone feeling loved and respected, and loving and respecting everyone else like we'd have them love us. Plus, the Kingdom of God is about *relationships*. It's *not* about possessions. When God says He's going to give us crown, it's not a crown you put on your head! It's a crown of *righteousness*, which is what makes it easy to relate to other people.

So there's so much to say about this. We can't cover it all. If you really want to raise a resilient child, if you really want to learn how to relate to your children, read the books, *Becoming Attached*, by Robert Karen, and the book, *Parenting from the Inside Out*, by Daniel Siegel – both about relationships – one about how we go our own view of relationships and one about how to relate to our kids. You can also search for the term *parenting* on our Website, liferesource.org. In there, somewhere, you'll find my quotes from some of these books, plus a lot of other things from the Bible.

The first and most important thing is *early nurturing* of children. We want God to have our back, don't we? – to take care of us, when we're in want to come to our rescue? Well, if we're taking God's place, that's the way we would be with our kids.

There's a thing called *maternal shared positive affect* – affect meaning emotion. And that happens when an infant is born and mother starts changing the baby's diaper, and she looks into the baby's eyes, and then she looks down at the diaper. This also happens during breast feeding or any kind of feeding and play – any time the mother is with the kid. It starts first with nursing and then with changing, I think. The mother looks into the baby's eyes, and she talks baby talk to it – “You stinky little thing.” And the baby's legs and arms move in unison with the modulation of her voice. You can see that in real time, but if you slow it down on a video, you can definitely see it. That's the baby's attempt to join up with the mother. And she, then, looks down at the diaper, and then she looks back up at the baby's eyes, and she tickles it. So there's this thing going back and forth where they have positive emotion. They're making a game of it. It's the teasing and tickling. The baby, as it gets older, can laugh and smile. This intermittent positive eye contact and this taking care of – meeting a baby's needs – makes the baby feel safe and secure and loved and okay. Okay. Right? That's where it comes from.

So, all that said, most people would ask about helping their children endure hardships that are already past infancy with their children. It's too late to go back and make them an infant and do a better job of it. So is there anything after that that we can do? Oh yes, there's a lot!

One big thing is to connect in their minds that what happens to them is often connected to what they did earlier – the consequences of their own actions. I meet adults all the time that don't understand that. I meet teens and adults all the time that blame everyone else for their problems, instead of seeing their own involvement.

One of the most obvious has to do with marriage. I really have been tempted sometimes to ask people, “If your mate is such a bad person, why did you choose them?” That's an interesting thing. Good premarital counseling helps people get to know each other, because most people don't do that anymore. They just get married. They don't know and they don't have enough information to make a good choice. No matter the answer, now that you've tied the knot, then what are you going to do about it? Are you going to cut and run? Or, are you going find a way to make it work?

Changing topics now: I watched a mother once, who had a little scooter – that's the baby that's old enough to crawl on the hardwood floor – scooch on her belly maybe. The baby saw her mother getting a snack ready for her. The baby started to whine and make gestures toward the food. So she put the food down on the floor about two feet from the baby. And when the baby pointed at the snack and whined, she encouraged the baby to scoot over there to get the snack. She gave it a little push, and she wiggled the snack, smiled, and was positive with the child. And eventually, she got the point and started scooching her way. When her mother realized that two feet might have been too far, she moved it closer, so it was easy. That was see as helping. But she was making the baby reach out and learn how to meet her own needs and solve her own problems, as opposed the boy that was the 300 pound, 6'7” football player, who couldn't make his own appointment for therapy.

Another thing that I think is really important is to teach children that life – the way God has designed it – is not supposed to be easy all the time. There are supposed to be hard things that happen. And most of those we bring on ourselves – not always, but a good bit of the time.

There was another therapist, named Winnicott, who coined the term *the good enough parent*. And the idea there is that we all need to learn that to experience frustration, want and lack, but we also need to be confident that our parents are going to rescue us when we're infants and take care of us. It's okay, on occasion, if mom doesn't change the baby's diaper immediately – not two hours later, but not the first time the baby whimpers.

Moving along in age, I told my mother, when I was fifteen, that I had seen an Austin-Healy Sprite. Maybe you remember those. They were the little tiny sports cars that had the headlights set up on the hood. They called them bug-eyed sprites, because they looked like an insect. And I told her I really wanted one. Now my mother did not take out a loan that afternoon and buy one for me. Instead, she said, "That's nice. Save up your money and get one." And I think that interchange may have been the beginning of a realization that I had some control over my own life. I think it wasn't look after that that I got a paper route. My mother had a huge positive influence on me by *not* rescuing me, or giving me everything I wanted, but making me work for it.

When I was seven, I was slogging it out in the second grade. I hated it. One day she came to school and saw that I was floundering – now working.... You know, parents used to get to go visit school with their kids. Maybe they still do – at least in elementary school. And instead of hassling the teacher to move me into a higher reading group, she took me to the library and I got to pick out some books about insects and animals, as I recall. And we would read to each other for about twenty minutes after school every day. And after a few trips to the library, one afternoon, I read my mother an incredibly fascinating book to her about coyotes. And after we finished she asked me what I had just done. And I said, "I read you a book about coyotes." And she took and pointed to some small print in the corner of the front cover that said, "Fifth Grade Level." She said, "Yes, and you're in the second grade, and you're reading at a fifth grade level." Well, after that, I read everything in sight, because now I knew I was a good reader. And I learned that *I* had a lot to do with whether my life would be easy or hard. That's the underlying message there that I got from that. So, no rescuing, but putting me in a position where I could be successful and learn that I could solve some of my own problems. I did, by the way, buy a bug-eyed Sprite when I got older – two of them, actually. Only one ran and I didn't keep them long. That was too much of a restoration project for me at that stage. But I still bought one.

The next thing that I want to talk about – and this is very touchy and hard – but it's age appropriate freedom of choice. How else can a person gain life experience, except by living it. You have to make some mistakes to learn lessons.

Now we're not talking about letting kids ride in cars with people that are high or drunk, or driving drunk themselves, or letting a teen do drugs in their room. Those are all potentially life-threatening situations. But, by the time a kid gets in high school, they ought to be able to do their homework without someone standing over them. Because they should want to have a better life for themselves and understand that *they* do the homework. *They're* going to get the education and *they're* going to get the income from it. I mean, there are all kinds of things where people short circuit their kids character development by doing the work for them, or treating them like they're six, instead of giving them the freedom to make choices. People think, "Well, if my kid doesn't pass high school, that's a terrible disaster!" It isn't! It isn't. They'll go get a GED when they get ready – when they finally figure it out, when they get tired of serving hamburgers. They go get a GED, and then, if you have a GED, you can get into most community colleges. And, if you get good grades for two years, you can go to college. There's more ways than one to do it. And isn't it better when it's their own idea and their own motivation?

I knew a guy whose father put so much pressure on him all his life to get good grades that, when he was applying for med school, he was having huge panic attacks just about being in the academic environment. If it had been *his* idea, things would have been different for him.

All right. Now here's the fifth thing.... Let me go back and tell you the four points I've covered so far:

- Early nurturing
- Teaching them about consequences
- Teaching them that life – the way God designed it – is supposed to be hard at times – and a matter of just doing something about it then
- And then, age appropriate freedom of choice
- Then, the fifth point is to teach them about their relationship with God through *your* relationship with Him.

If we love our children, and have their back, even when they have embarrassed us, or done some stupid things, or made hurtful mistakes, they will learn about the grace of Jesus Christ. If we are interested in our children, their activities, their hopes and dreams, their goals, they will see God as personally interested in *them*. Now, if your neighbor's parent is like that with your kid, that doesn't necessarily happen. You have a *special* relationship that's given to you by God with your child. And your child will see God through the eyes of their relationship with you.

If we talk to our children respectfully, rather than berating them angrily, or talking down to them, they will learn how to talk to other people. And they will learn that God doesn't get angry with them and cast them off forever when they make a mistake. If we spend enough time with them, they will learn that God is present with them. If we do things without rescuing them from their folly, they will learn to be careful and to work their own way out of trouble.

And we, as parents, should know – and this is the caveat – that none of these things will work unless these are lifelong stances that we take, on our part, that we are consistently involved with. God says He never changes. So our love for our child should never change. Our respect exhibited to our children should never change. Our support for them should never change.

And finally, the sixth thing is:

- God has a job for them to do now.

That's something every kid needs to know. Everybody, no matter what age they are, can set a good example, can be a good friend.

I was at the Feast one year, and my – was he three yet? – my grandson... church was over and we were walking down the side aisle – there was a hard wall to our right and chairs to the left – and we were walking down the aisle toward the back. And there's a little girl with her head down on a pillow on her chair. She's standing, but she's bent over with her head down on a pillow. And my grandson is coming down through the aisle pretty fast, and he wheels up right beside her, and he puts his head down by hers, and puts his arm around her, and then he gets up and goes on.

Everybody can set a good example. *Everybody* can be a friend. You don't have to be a certain age to do that. *Everybody* can have their friend's back, the way you would want them to have yours. If we don't put other people down, if we follow a good example that other people set for us, and set them for others, if we rise above drama, and if we realize that being a good example is not about talking. It's about *walking*. I mean, there is so much good stuff that can happen there, if we just act that way. So we need to talk to our kids about that.

I said that the last one there was the last one, but this is the seventh point:

- Pray.

No human has ever done these things perfectly, so we need to pray and ask God to help us represent Him to our children. And, if we do that, then He will help us be, not perfect, but to use the man's term, *good enough*.

This is Bill Jacobs for LifeResource Ministries, serving children, families and the Church of God.