



Building resilience in primary-aged children – Preparing them for the road ahead.

By Michael Hawton, Child Psychologist (MAPS) and [Parentshop](#) founder.

The primary school years represent a critical window for developing the emotional resilience that will serve your child throughout their life. Yet increasingly, I'm observing Australian parents falling into what I call 'appearances parenting' - rushing to rescue their children from every disappointment or challenge, often more concerned with how their parenting looks to others than what truly serves their child's development.

Jonathan Haidt's research in his book *The Anxious Generation* reveals that we're facing an unprecedented shift in childhood. We've become overprotective in the real world whilst under protective in the virtual world. For primary-aged children, this manifests as parents who won't let their 8-year-old walk to the corner shop alone but will hand them an iPad or phone unsupervised for hours.

This overprotection in the real world is robbing our children of essential learning opportunities. When we consistently step in to resolve their playground disputes, complete their forgotten homework, or smooth over every social disappointment, we're inadvertently teaching them that they're incapable of managing life's inevitable challenges.

Perhaps most concerning is the research showing an increase in children with an external locus of control - the belief that their destiny is determined by outside forces rather than their own actions. Locus of control refers to the extent to which individuals believe they have control over the events in their lives. It's a concept in psychology that describes whether a person believes their actions and decisions influence outcomes, or whether external forces like luck, fate, or other people are more responsible. An external locus of control correlates to higher levels of anxiety and learned helplessness while an internal locus of control is related to more resilience thinking and higher academic results. This shift directly correlates with rising anxiety levels in young people. When children believe they have no control over outcomes, they naturally become more anxious and helpless.

The solution isn't to throw children into the deep end without support. Instead, we need to become skilled at scaffolding their problem-solving abilities and helping them to challenge cognitive distortion. When your Year 5 child comes home upset because their friend didn't play with them at lunch, resist the urge to immediately contact the teacher or arrange a playdate.

Instead, try these approaches:

Ask curious questions: "If you could imagine tomorrow going really well with your friend, what would need to happen?" This helps them visualise positive outcomes and think through practical steps.

Challenge catastrophic thinking: When they declare "Everyone hates me," ask them to look for evidence both ways. "Can you think of three people who showed kindness to you this week?"

Practice problem-solving: "What are a few different things you could try tomorrow to make lunch time more fun?"

It is more commonplace in Australian schools and within Australian families to, whilst well-intentioned, inadvertently contribute to this problem through structures that reward maintaining children on anxiety lists rather than helping them overcome their challenges. When schools receive letters excusing children from normal activities like sports or public speaking "to avoid stress," they're often acting against best clinical practice or long-term resilience building for the child.

The research is unequivocal: accommodation increases anxiety over time. Accommodation in a psychological sense refers to parents or schools adjusting a task for a child to reduce or prevent a child's distress. While this is sometimes necessary, overtime it can be unhelpful or harmful to child's resilience and development. What actually reduces anxiety is gradual exposure to the challenging event - helping children have a go at increasingly challenging tasks with appropriate support.

Practical Strategies for Parents

Start with age-appropriate independence. Let your 6-year-old pack their own school bag, even if they forget something occasionally. The natural consequence (borrowing a pencil or going without a snack) teaches responsibility more effectively than your constant reminders.

Create problem-solving opportunities. When siblings fight, don't immediately arbitrate. Ask them to come up with three possible solutions and choose one to try.

Model emotional regulation. When you face your own challenges, narrate your problem-solving process aloud: "I'm feeling frustrated about this traffic, but I can choose to use this time to plan my day instead of getting angry."

The goal isn't to eliminate all stress from your child's life - it's to help them develop the tools to manage stress effectively. Every challenge they overcome independently builds their confidence and resilience for the bigger challenges ahead.

Remember, building resilience is like physical fitness - it requires regular practice with gradually increasing challenges. I like to say, prepare the child for the road ahead, not the road for the child. By scaffolding rather than rescuing, you're giving your primary-aged child the greatest gift possible: the belief that they can handle whatever life brings.

Michael Hawton is founder of Parentshop, providing education and resources for parents and industry professionals working with children. He has authored two books on child behaviour management: *Talk Less Listen More* and *Engaging Adolescents*. You can find more information, including his books and self-paced online parenting courses at <https://www.parentshop.com.au/parent-courses/>