

# EVERYDAY STRONG RESILIENCE HANDBOOK



A new approach to anxiety and depression



Tools for parents, teachers, neighbors, and other trusted adults



United Way of Utah County



## YOU CAN START BUILDING EVERYDAY RESILIENCE BY FOSTERING SAFETY, CONNECTION, AND CONFIDENCE IN THE CHILDREN AROUND YOU

We're on a mission to build resilient kids and strong communities

United Way has collaborated with a group of experts on anxiety, depression, and psychological well-being to develop these activities for you.

The Everyday Strong panel of experts includes medical professionals, educators, social workers, and mental health specialists.

Find more information on our panel of experts at [www.EveryDayStrong.org](http://www.EveryDayStrong.org).

Try these everyday activities

This guide outlines easy and fun activities, developed by the United Way Everyday Strong panel of experts, that you can do with a child to build their resilience.

### Featured Experts



Matt Swenson, MD,  
Child Psychiatrist



Catherine Johnson,  
Licensed Clinical  
Social Worker



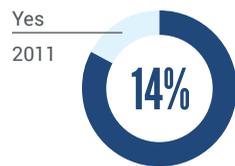
Kyle Reyes, PhD,  
Vice President of  
Student Affairs, Utah  
Valley University

## MORE KIDS ARE EXPERIENCING DEPRESSION AND ANXIETY THAN EVER BEFORE

Every two years, kids in Utah schools are asked:

During the past 12 months, did you ever feel so sad or hopeless almost every day for two weeks or more in a row that you stopped doing some usual activities?\*

More kids than ever before are answering yes.



You don't have to be an expert to build resilient kids

Research from the Center for the Developing Child at Harvard University shows that the most common factor in a child's ability to develop resilience is a caring, supportive relationship with at least one adult. This might be a parent but it can also be any caring adult, including grandparents, teachers, friends, and neighbors. You don't need a degree or specialized training to play a significant role in supporting a child. This guide will help you learn how to start building everyday resilience in the kids around you!

\*This question comes from the Utah Student Health and Risk Protection (SHARP) survey data. You can learn more at: <https://dsamh.utah.gov/reports/sharp-survey>

## A NEW FRAMEWORK FOR EMOTIONAL HEALTH

We know that food, sleep, and shelter are critical to kids' well-being. A tired, hungry kid can't focus on making good grades!

But kids have other needs that are just as important. Kids need to feel safe, connected, and confident. These pillars of emotional health need to be met for kids to thrive.





# PHYSICAL

Physical needs are the first step on the pyramid. It's easy to underestimate the importance of these needs but when a child's physical needs are met, it lays the foundation for the rest of their well-being.

## BE AWARE OF TIREDNESS

Reflect with a child on how tiredness affects their emotions. For example, if it's bedtime, you may not need to resolve all your discussions right then. Ask them something like, "I care a lot about what you're saying. Do you think we could talk about this more in the morning?" There's a well-meaning saying, "Never go to bed angry" but sometimes "going to bed angry" is exactly what we need to do. We often feel much better and ready to deal with conflict after a good night's sleep.

## MOVE TOGETHER

Take the time to move with a child! Moving together can be an opportunity for getting your physical needs met, but also to talk and enjoy time together. This builds a feeling of safety and connection. Let the child pick the activity (walking, swimming, throwing a ball, etc.). It doesn't matter what the activity is, the important part is that you're moving your bodies and spending time together.



## ENJOY A SENSORY EXPERIENCE

All of us have sensory needs, like the feel of the sun on our face or the wind in our hair. If a child is having a hard time, a sensory experience can help them feel grounded. For example, playing with water, sand, slime, or walking barefoot in the grass. Spend one minute mindfully considering the texture, smell, sound, and appearance. Invite the child to share what stood out to them.

## BE MINDFUL OF BREATHING

Make a point of helping children be more in tune with their bodies. Try encouraging a child to check in with their body or taking a deep breath. For example, say, "Before we leave the house, let's check in with our shoulders, jaw, feet, or stomach while taking five slow, deep breaths."

If you as an adult think this sounds kind of "new age," you might consider experimenting with a mindful, physical check-in for yourself! It's good for your physical and emotional health.

## CARE FOR PHYSICAL NEEDS TO CALM ANXIETY

If a child is very shy or worries a lot, they may routinely complain of stomach aches or other physical ailments before school or big events. Worry and fear are felt in the body and the brain can't always talk the body into calming down. Spend extra time on physical needs and pay close attention to helping a child feel safe. For example, you may want to designate a school secretary or other trusted adult whom the child can visit when they are having stomach pain or tiredness and who will both respond lovingly and with awareness of the role anxiety can play in physical pain.

## OFFER FOOD TO CONNECT AND SUPPORT

We often underestimate how much nutritious food can both stabilize a child's emotions and show them that we care. We all know the feeling of being "hangry." If a child seems unusually cranky or combative, lovingly invite them to sit down with you and have a snack. Or, if they don't want to interact, you may consider simply leaving the snack where they'll be able to access it. The goal is to provide a tangible support while they're having a hard time and show them that you are there for them. (Even adults who are struggling emotionally may benefit from a good meal just as much as words of encouragement or a friendly visit!)

Worry and fear are felt in the body and the brain can't always talk the body into calming down. When this happens, spend extra time caring for physical needs.



# SAFE

Even if a child may be physically safe, they may not feel safe. They may be afraid of getting in trouble or letting a loved one down. A child who feels safe knows they can be themselves with you and trusts that you will always love them no matter what.

## SAFE TO TALK

**What to do:** During an emotionally charged conversation, imagine that you have tape over your mouth. Stay engaged and continue to communicate in any way you can without speaking.

**Why:** When children feel they will be listened to and understood, they feel safe to share challenges, true feelings, and ideas. Without that feeling of safety to talk, they may overcompensate by becoming defensive, insistent, or shut down.

## SAFE TO BE YOU

**What to do:** Praise something unique about a child. Consider even acknowledging how unexpected, different, confusing, or quirky this trait or interest is and how you love or admire them as they are.

**Why:** Everyone needs to recognize and seek fulfillment in their own unique abilities and interests. When a child feels safe to be different from others, they can thrive as they feel able to make their own choices.

## SAFE TO FEEL

**What to do:** When you see a child overwhelmed with anger, sadness, or anxiety, validate their emotions instead of trying to eliminate or solve their problem. Try statements like, “I would feel the same way if I were you,” or “It’s good to pay attention to our emotions. They often have something to teach us!”

**Why:** When we invalidate children’s feelings, even unintentionally, we can make it unsafe for them to have or express emotions. We may say, “You’re OK, hop up!” when they fall or “Seriously? Stop it!” when they pout. Even if you have to redirect the behavior, acknowledging that feelings are okay is an important lesson.

## SAFE TO EXPLORE

**What to do:** When a child hears or sees a situation where a person made a decision that is not consistent with the family’s values, ask, “Do you think it would affect our relationship if you made those choices?” Try to express reassurance that it wouldn’t change your love for them.

**Why:** When we quickly condemn actions we don’t approve of—such as swearing, bullying, clothing choices, smoking, lying, not going to church, etc.—our children can feel their relationship is endangered if they ever do any of those things. That reaction creates a feeling of a lack of safety in a relationship that can be harmful to a child’s ability to make their own wise choices.

## SAFE TO SEPARATE

**What to do:** Notice and comment on things you observe about your child when you’re apart. The goal is for the child to feel safe to do things without you by emphasizing that they’re still in your thoughts when they’re away. For example, “I saw you playing with your friends today! I love watching you enjoy life!”

**Why:** All people, especially children, carry fears of separation. They wonder, “Do they think about me when I am away?,” “Will I be remembered?,” or “Do others notice the effort I am making while on my own?” Children can feel safe to separate from you if they are reassured that you are delighted to be a witness to their life, despite normal and necessary separation.

## SAFE TO FAIL

**What to do:** Share a story about a significant failure or mistake you made in your own life. Be detailed and vulnerable about your feelings. Try not to emphasize how you overcame that adversity or learned a valuable lesson. The most important thing to communicate is that you understand failure, embarrassment, or disappointment.

**Why:** Failure is a part of every person’s life, but a child’s early experiences with failure can feel scary, even overwhelming. Learning from others’ experiences with failure, including the honest, tough emotions that come with it, can help a child relate and imagine themselves working through their own failures.



Acknowledge that feelings are okay. Instead of trying to eliminate their problem, say, “It’s good to pay attention to our emotions. They often have something to teach us!”

# CONNECTED



Connection is when a child feels truly understood. More than just being in the same space as your child or giving extravagant gifts, connection happens in the everyday moments of our lives, such as quiet breaks, casual conversations, and shared experiences.

## CONNECT BY APOLOGIZING

**What to do:** Sincerely apologize for a past offense or hurt, even if it happened long ago and you might imagine the incident has been forgotten. Take responsibility for what you said or did, try to fix what you can, and let them know you will do better next time.

**Why:** All of us carry emotional wounds from times we were mistreated. Children remember these times, too. Apologizing to a child can help rebuild trust and heal relationships.

## CONNECT THROUGH WRITING

**What to do:** Write a note and leave it to be found. Put less emphasis on the specific behaviors, choices, or accomplishments of the child and emphasize your relationship and your feelings about them.

**Why:** A written note can often express things in a different and sometimes more thoughtful way than saying it out loud. It shows additional thought and effort and can be saved, re-read, and treasured for a long time to come.

## CONNECT IN PLAYING

**What to do:** Take time to play, especially when you would have previously said no. If the child never asks, find a time to invite them to play with you in an activity they enjoy. Join in with Barbie or video games or dig out an old board game.

**Why:** Play and laughter are the most powerful tools for connection with young children. Playing with friends or entertaining themselves are inadequate replacements for play with important adults.

## CONNECT BY ASKING

**What to do:** Ask questions that show that you're interested in who they are and that you want to connect. For example, "What's your favorite part of \_\_\_\_ (video game, book, sport, etc.)?" or, "Is there anything I could do to help us feel closer?" It's less important if they have an answer to all of your questions. They just need to hear you express your desire to be close.

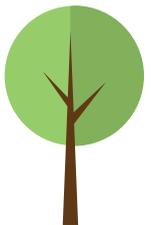
**Why:** To really connect with another person, we have to ask questions and listen to get to know them. A child needs to hear you express your desire to be close to them, even if they don't feel like talking. Make sure to follow up by listening carefully.

## CONNECT THROUGH LAUGHING

**What to do:** Find ways to cultivate humor in your relationships. Watch a silly video, share a joke, and look for a chance to turn an argument into a laugh. Talk in a silly voice or dance around!

**Why:** Laughter and humor improve health, strengthen shared connections and experiences, and create positive memories. They also reduce stress and anxiety about everyday challenges.

Playtime with adults is as important as playtime with fellow kids. Join in with Barbie or video games or dig out an old board game.





# CONFIDENT

Once children begin to feel safe and connected, they can start to develop confidence. Confidence is a sense of independence that comes when children develop skills and qualities that help them feel capable. When children are confident, they feel free to accept challenges, try new things, and find solutions to problems.

## BUILD CONFIDENCE BY EXPRESSING CONFIDENCE

**What to do:** When you are concerned about a child's achievement levels in school, sports, or the arts, resist the urge to lecture on the seriousness of the situation or to problem solve for them. Instead, give some calm reassurance and encouragement such as, "Sometimes things take time. It's OK not to have all of this figured out right now." or "What do you think might help?"

**Why:** Kids, and especially adolescents, often hide their worries which can lead adults to believe that they aren't taking life seriously. Anxious parents pile on added stress by saying things like, "Remember that your grades will be on your transcript forever." Instead, the best way to build confidence is often to express confidence. By doing this, you communicate to a child that you trust the child's ability to work through a challenge. Over time, with your trust and support, a child will build confidence and feel capable.



## BUILD CONFIDENCE BY NAMING THE PROBLEM

**What to do:** When a child frequently encounters a difficulty in their life, create a name for that challenge and refer to it as something external from them. For example:

- Instead of, "You shouldn't be so scared, it's not a big deal," try, "It looks like your brain has pulled the alarm! How could we let your brain know that this isn't an emergency?"
- Instead of, "You have a problem being able to turn off video games!" try, "It looks like the X-bot has taken over again!"
- Instead of: "I know you could do this if you would just try!" try, "I know you are working really hard, and it looks like ADHD is still getting in the way. What would be helpful?"

**Why:** Psychologists will often "name it to tame it." This practice of "externalization" helps prevent a child from feeling discouraged or demoralized by problems. It changes the problem solving from a "me fixing you" to an "us fixing it."

## BUILD CONFIDENCE BY REMEMBERING

**What to do:** At the end of the day, take some time with a child to reflect and review the positive things that the child did and experienced that day.

**Why:** Negative memories are said to be more "sticky" than positive ones, so people often need help remembering their good deeds and successes. For young children, just reviewing the events at the end of a typical day can improve their ability to remember successes. Older kids can use these memories to build confidence in their ability to work hard and overcome challenges.

## BUILD CONFIDENCE BY PLAYING AND PRACTICING

**What to do:** Playtime can be helpful for practicing skills and building confidence. For example, if you're pretending to be a prince locked in a tower, encourage your child to take a risk, try something new, or solve a problem in the story in a creative way. Praise your child for the skill they exhibit through the imaginative game.

**Why:** In play, kids practice for life and challenges with power and courage, roles and rules. There are constant opportunities for adults to acknowledge and praise their competence.

When you express confidence, you communicate to a child that you trust their ability to work through a challenge.



We're not going to stop until every child in every neighborhood feels safe, connected, and confident. We can't do it without you.

For more help, dial 2-1-1 at any time from any phone and talk directly to a community resource specialist who can connect you with free or low-cost counseling services, support groups, or crisis services.

For more information and resources on anxiety and depression, visit **[www.EveryDayStrong.org](http://www.EveryDayStrong.org)**.

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