



Family Stories Build Resiliency in Kids

Growing up, many of us heard about our parents' or grandparents' hardships. They may have told us about walking to school, using ration coupons during wartime, or being working odd jobs until they found something they really liked to do. Overcoming difficulties is the definition of resiliency. Some parents have noted that their children have great difficulty with this skill, which is required in [recovery](#).

Bruce Feiler reports on what makes a family work well. He finds that significant research exists in the field of team cohesion. Despite that, much of the information has remained secreted away by corporations and the military who are using the information to function more efficiently and productively.

Feiler spoke with Marshall Duke from Emory University, who studied what kept families together during times of struggle. With another colleague, Robyn Fivush, (and inspiration from his wife), he developed a set of [questions](#) designed to test how much children knew about their family. This list of questions is available through the sources below.

Feiler reports, "Dr. Duke and Dr. Fivush asked those questions of four dozen families in the summer of 2001, and taped several of their dinner table conversations. They then compared the

children's results to a battery of psychological tests the children had taken, and reached an overwhelming conclusion. The more children knew about their family's history, the stronger their sense of control over their lives, the higher their self-esteem and the more successfully they believed their families functioned. The "Do You Know?" scale turned out to be the best single predictor of children's emotional health and happiness."

Then, two months after their initial assessment, September 11th occurred. The psychologists knew that they had to include this horrific event in their research. Each of their subjects had experienced the same national tragedy. However, those children who knew more about their families were better able to deal with the stress of the trauma.

Research in Action

Family narratives take one of three shapes. Ascending narratives follow the "we used to have nothing, but now we have much more" track. Descending narratives are the opposite of that. Oscillating narratives show that life has ups and downs. This version of one's life story is the most healthful. When children know that normal life has hardships and successes, they are more likely to demonstrate resiliency. All life has difficulties, and successful people are able to bounce back from difficulties.

A parental narrative is very helpful to teach children where they come from. Additionally, Dr. Duke reports that children who have a strong intergenerational sense have the most self confidence. They realize that they are part of a larger story that includes more people than their immediate family. Dr. Duke recommends that parents use a variety of occasions like holidays, vacations, and family meals to pass on family history. Try to think ahead and ask a relative to share a story over dinner or when you come to visit. Be realistic: no one has lived a perfect life. Allow your kids to see the challenges you and other loved ones have faced.

Common experiences include: not getting into a preferred college, being fired from a job, doing poorly on a test/job performance, or dealing with a difficult boss or teacher. Let teens know that real life rarely looks like our images on social media.

Feiler learned, "If you want a happier family, create, refine and retell the story of your family's positive moments and your ability to bounce back from the difficult ones. That act alone may increase the odds that your family will thrive for many generations to come."