

# Cultivating Children's Inner Strength

Excerpted from *Building Emotional Intelligence*

BY LINDA LANTIERI

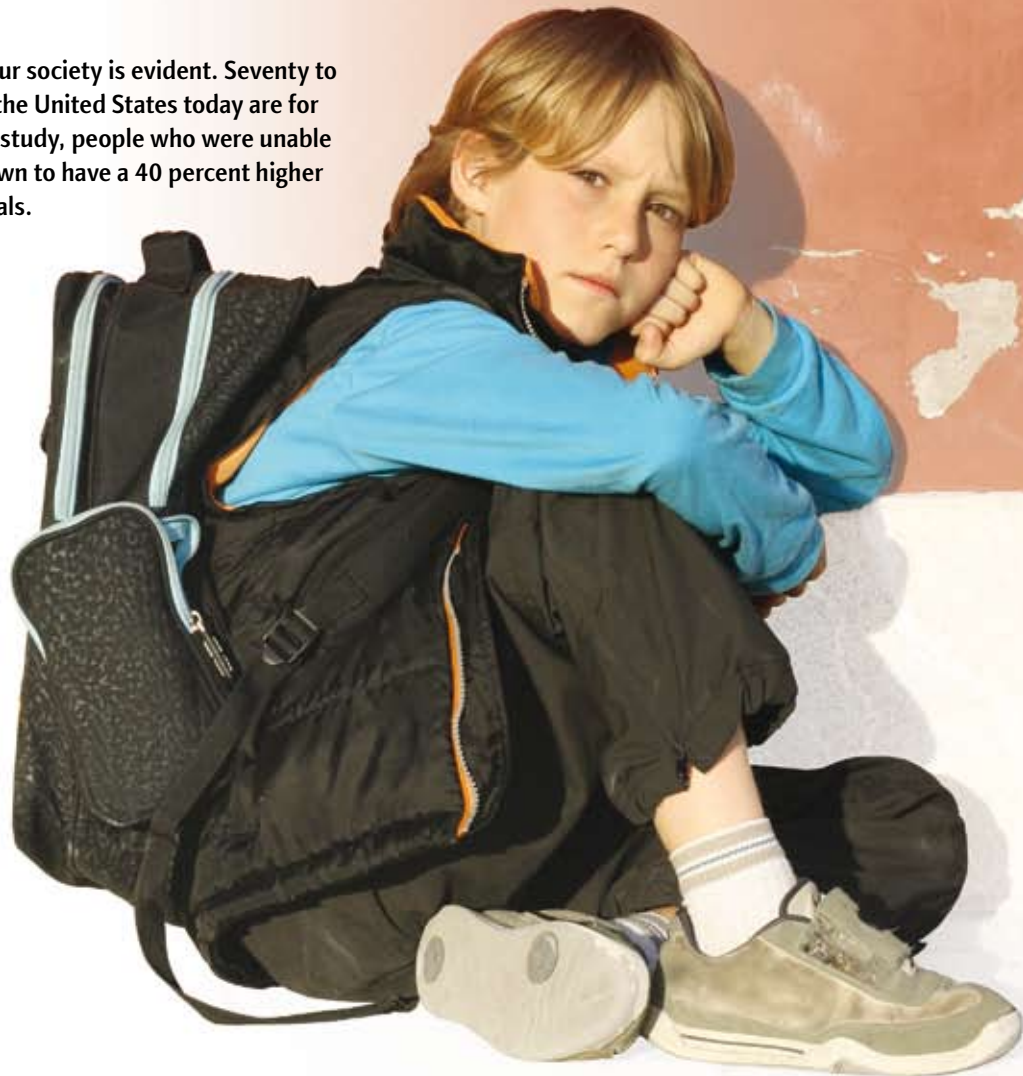
The severity of unmanaged stress in our society is evident. Seventy to ninety percent of all doctor's visits in the United States today are for stress-related disorders. In a ten-year study, people who were unable to manage stress effectively were shown to have a 40 percent higher death rate than non-stressed individuals.

Our society is bent on quick fixes when life challenges come our way. We medicate ourselves and our children. Americans consume 5 billion tranquilizers every year in an effort to control their stress.

Children's lives are so much more stressful today as well. When adults in children's lives are experiencing a hurried, frenetic pace, our children become the receivers of that behavior. Our society itself in the United States has also changed in many ways so as to increase pressure on children and compromise their childhood. Many parents are working longer hours and are allowing work to intrude on their lives anywhere and everywhere. As a result more children are spending substantial amounts of time with multiple caregivers. There is a constant push for children to achieve at academic skills earlier, and so school becomes a big source of stress in their lives.

## Today's kids are over-stressed, over-scheduled and overwhelmed

Too many young people today are experiencing mental health and adjustment difficulties, and our society just doesn't have the resources to provide appropriate help and attention. It is estimated that one out of five nine- to seventeen-year-olds has a diagnosable mental disorder. The fact is that an increasing number of children are entering schools in



crisis, unprepared cognitively and emotionally to learn. At the same time, educators confront the challenge of higher public expectations while dealing with diminishing internal resources to do their jobs well. We then often mistake the symptoms in our children of unmanaged stress as inappropriate behavior that needs to be stopped. Children are reprimanded by teachers and parents for things they do that are really "stress reactions," rather than intentional misbehavior. The situation becomes a downward spiral of one

stress reaction after another, and both adult and child are caught in it.

## The top three sources of stress in children

A poll conducted by the national Kids Poll surveyed 875 children, ages nine through thirteen, about what caused them stress and what coping strategies they used the most to deal with the stress in their lives.

The top three sources of stress that they reported were: grades, school, and homework (36%); family (32%); and friends, peers, gossip, and teasing (21%). The top three coping strategies were: play or do something active (52%); listen to music (44%); watch TV or play a video game (42%). Out of 10 top coping strategies listed as being chosen the most, not one of them was one that involved going within or being contemplative. The good news, however, is that 75% of those surveyed reported the need for their parents to spend time with them when they are going through a difficult time. This may help as you approach your child in trying out some of these techniques. These strategies will not only help manage their stress better but also provide them with some quality time with you.

### **Developing resilience helps kids cope with life's challenges**

Our experience as children is vastly different from the world our children face. Today's world includes all kinds of stressors that didn't even exist when we were growing up. As an elementary teacher during the 1970s and later as an administrator in New York City schools, I started to notice that young people's social and emotional development seemed to be on a serious decline. I was seeing children coming to school more aggressive, more disobedient, more impulsive, more sad, more lonely. In fact, psychologist Thomas Achenbach, from the University of Vermont, confirmed my observations. His groundbreaking study of thousands of American children, first in the mid-1970s and then again in the late 1980s, proved this to be true. America's children – from the poorest to the most affluent – displayed a decline across the board in their scores on over forty measures designed to reflect a variety of emotional and social capacities.

The dominant paradigm in response to this decline in children's social and emotional capacities focused on trying

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to identify the "risk factors" that caused this anti-social behavior. There were almost two decades of school-based "prevention wars" like the "war on drugs" to help reduce the negative. In the last two decades we have witnessed a healthy paradigm shift. Researchers and practitioners are studying the concept of "resilience" – an innate ability we all have to self correct and thrive in the face of life's challenges. Bonnie Bernard, a pioneer in the field of strength-based approaches, has helped us take a

look at how young people's strengths and capabilities can be developed in order to protect them from the potential harm that these circumstances represent. This body of research has direct relevance as we think about cultivating inner strength in children through giving them a regular practice of quieting their minds and calming their bodies.

The resiliency-building research also points to one of the most important "protective factors" a child could have – the presence of at least one caring and supportive adult (ideally several) who believes in the worth of the child. Children need the adults in their lives to be steady anchors who never give up on them. They also need to learn concrete social and emotional skills that are taught both in the home and at school, and they need lots of opportunity to practice those skills so they become available to them whenever they need to use them. These materials strengthen all three of the above conditions.

What do we know specifically about the benefits of systematically teaching adults and children to relax their bodies and focus their minds as a way of building resiliency?



There actually have been hundreds of studies published, some in peer-reviewed journals, of the benefits in particular of the calming technique called Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) through the work of Jon Kabat-Zinn, who founded the Stress Reduction Program at the University of Massachusetts Medical School.

He first studied the use of mindfulness technique with adult patients suffering from chronic pain. Kabat-Zinn found that patients not only reported a decrease of pain but it also lowered their blood pressure and they reported an increased sense of well-being. Today, forms of MBSR are being used in more than 200 medical centers around the country for not only treating chronic pain but also cardiovascular disease and the effects of cancer therapy.

### **Mindfulness techniques reduce anxiety and increase children's ability to focus**

Until a short time ago, most of the research about the effects of these kinds of practices has been conducted on adults. More rigorous scientific research began in approximately 2006 using measurable data that could produce reproducible results on the effects of these calming techniques on children. Today several studies are underway throughout the United States and Canada. *The Inner Resilience Program*, which I founded and direct, is one such research effort.

Many of us who have been teaching these skills to children have been heartened by some of the subjective evidence we've noticed. For example, Kimberly Schonert-Reichl, from the University of Columbia in Canada, observed that children exposed to learning a mindfulness technique similar to the one in this book were, "less aggressive; less oppositional towards teachers; more attentive in class; and reported more positive emotions including more optimism."

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Susan Smalley, Director of the Mindfulness Awareness Research Center at UCLA, also found positive results teaching these techniques to teenagers with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). She found that learning mindfulness techniques reduced their anxiety and increased their ability to focus. Several other more rigorous scientific studies are underway. In the meantime, many of us are continuing to experience first-hand the benefits this kind of approach can have with children.

Several weeks before doing the activities in the guide or on the CD, you can start to integrate some rituals and routines into your family life to expose your child to the opportunities that stillness and quiet can offer. By modeling these practices in your own interaction with your child and in how you structure your home you are saying to your child that you value silence and stillness. You'll also be creating a more natural venue for changing deeply engrained habits of how we respond to stressful events and for learning healthful ways that we hope will become life-long habits. It's only through consistent practice that we will learn these skills.

### **Have a dinnertime quieting ritual**

As part of a family ritual around dinnertime, a candle could be lit for a few moments of silence as everyone focuses on the flame of the candle.

Staring can help the mind to move into a deeper state of consciousness. Before you begin eating, you may each want to take a turn expressing one thing you are grateful for about the day.

### **Teach the "keep calm" activity**

This simple, four-step breathing activity is highlighted in the book *Emotionally Intelligent Parenting* by Maurice Elias, Steven Tobias, and Brian Friedlander. It can be used whenever your child is upset and self-control is needed. Teach these four simple steps to your child (and try it yourself!).

1. Tell yourself, "Stop and take a look around."
2. Tell yourself, "Keep calm."
3. Take a deep breath through your nose while you count to five, hold it while you count to two, and then breathe out through your mouth while you count to five.
4. Repeat these steps until you feel calm.

### **Use calming music**

Transitions and other stressful times during the day (such as when you're getting ready for school or trying to meet the other pressures of time) are great times to stop for a moment and honor the shift from one activity to another. The sound of soft, slow classical music can really help change the way we feel at such moments. While you might use this music as background, it's even more effective if you take a "music break" – stop for even three minutes to listen quietly to a piece of music. This can be during times of transition when your child is focusing on something intently and needs to stop, or if she starts to feel the signs of heightened stress. It is well known that listening to calming music has a direct correlation with lowering our respiration and heart rate, as well as changing our emotional moods.

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### **Make room for silence and stillness**

One gift you can give yourself and your family is the gift of silence and stillness; it is simple to do, but rare in most of our homes. Try to find times in your day to take a quick break. Pause. Be still, be quiet, and take a few deep breaths together. Be present to the moment. For example, if you have a habit of turning on the radio for car rides, you can make it a family practice to have a few minutes of silence at the beginning and end of the car ride and ask children to notice what they see, hear, feel, etc., during that time. You can go on walks on your way to or from school or other errands and decide to be silent for some of the time. You can also decide to bring more moments of silence into an engaged activity such as preparing food together or wrapping presents. Or, in your rare, but precious one-on-one moments, simply be present to who your child truly is. These

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kinds of moments can actually help us keep in touch with our inner lives.

### **Address violent or disturbing events your child witnesses**

If your child is unexpectedly exposed to something disturbing during the day – maybe she is watching television when a violent or frightening news story plays, or perhaps you've even come across a traffic accident or you see an ambulance rushing with sirens blaring – make it a practice to pause for a moment and send positive thoughts or healing to those in need.

Rather than integrating the fear and stress reaction, your child will release much of the stress of the moment through having such a positive outlet. Being able to talk about your child's concerns and being fully present as you listen to her questions are also crucial in how your child will remember any particular scary event.

### **Honor nature and provide opportunity to be outdoors**

Nature provides important moments for stillness as we connect to something larger than ourselves. Being in nature calls upon us to be in our bodies and reconnects the mind/body split. At the most basic level, out of doors, there is room for children to run, shout, and play, releasing pent-up energy from their bodies accumulated through various stressors. We can breathe more deeply outdoors, simply because there is often more oxygen than indoors.



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And looking at a far away horizon or sky can help us gain needed perspective on our small world, bounded by our bodies and lives. A relationship with nature is like any good relationship. It needs to unfold over time, moving towards intimacy and respect. We can perhaps then take on our challenges with a new, more optimistic attitude and cognitively restructure our attitudes about certain stresses. Sometimes all it takes is a new perspective to shift us out of the bad habits that keep us from being our best selves.

### Engaging their senses

In addition to providing opportunity for your child to be in nature, help her to be present by engaging her senses. Your child will come to know whatever place she is outdoors through her body, not just her mind. Focusing on one sense at a time can be a very useful way to do this. Or simply notice changes in the season or in the night sky. You can help your child choose a peaceful place outdoors and then study that one place over time. For example, she could find a favorite tree near where you live and notice the changes that occur with it in each season of the year. The goal is for your child to develop a mindful presence

outside – that is, one of being aware of her surroundings at a level of detail that transcends the relatively detached way we often experience nature.

### Help your child check into her body cues

When children are younger, they often have the ability to tune in to their body's signals. As they grow older, they get messages from the outer world to turn off their natural sensitivity. However, before you can release stress, you need first to be aware that you *are* stressed. Help your child to learn the signs of stress through the checklist, "What Do I Feel When I'm Stressed?" in Chapter 5. You can model this awareness yourself by making a note of times when your heart is beating fast, your breathing has become shallow, or you notice other signs of stress. You can also help your child to become more aware of her body's cues by using the biodots that are recommended in this book. These dots respond to the temperature of our bodies and through color changes tell us just how stressed (or calm) we are. Remember it is equally important for you to notice your own stress triggers as well.

### Use story time effectively

Reading a story out loud together with your child can be a wonderful way to experience a contemplative moment – especially if it is done with intention. When reading a book, the pace immediately slows down, providing moments to pause along the way. You also experience each other's voice and can notice the various emotions that are stirring in both of you. There can be lots of unplanned moments where the story can take either of you to a deeper place. You might learn about a concern or deep question either of you has.

Children also love the repetition of reading a book many times. Repeating something – such as reading a book out loud or listening to the CD that accompanies this book – helps to strengthen a set of neural pathways in the brain that stores this memory for future use ■

### Resources

**Biodots** are available from a variety of online suppliers, including amazon.com.



**LINDA LANTIERI** is an internationally known expert in social and emotional learning, conflict resolution, and crisis

intervention with 40 years of experience in the field of education. She is the director of *The Inner Resilience Program* and a founding member of the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL), [www.case1.org](http://www.case1.org). She is also a cofounder of the Resolving Conflict Creatively Program (RCCR), a social and emotional learning program being implemented in schools ([www.innerresiliencetidescenter.org/home.htm](http://www.innerresiliencetidescenter.org/home.htm)).

Linda's latest book is *Building Emotional Intelligence: Techniques to Cultivate Inner Strength in Children*, which contains an introduction and accompanying CD containing calming and relaxation practices for children and young adults guided by NY Times bestselling author and psychologist, Daniel Goleman. Visit her website at [www.lindalantieri.com](http://www.lindalantieri.com)