



The Pandemic and Kids' Mental Health

How Ongoing Conversations Build Resilience

Jeanne Blake: Paula, the enormity of this experience — the pandemic — demands that we continually talk with children and adolescents about their experience. Give us some context for why that's so important.

Dr. Paula K. Rauch: When there's something emotionally intense, it's important children keep talking about it and understand it. For example, when they have positive experience, it's an opportunity to say, "It's great we got to have the school fair this year. It was so disappointing when we didn't have it last year." It helps us to feel grateful for what we're able to do after missing out on things. And when a child faces disappointment: "We were going to go to an amusement park, but now there's a rainstorm with lightning. It can't happen." We want to join children and hear what they're really feeling: "What are you disappointed about? What were you looking forward to?" We also want to remind them: "We've had a lot of experience with missing things and coming up with other things we enjoy. This isn't the hardest thing we've been through together." Memory underscores the negative. So, if we want children to highlight the positive — their strength and adaptability — we need to help them be aware of what we can do as a family and as individuals, so they face the future challenges with extra confidence: "We've done this before. We know how to do this. We can't go to an amusement park, but we could have a fun inside picnic. Remember the one we had last year?" Let's draw on the ways we found positives even in difficult times. That helps us find positives when there's a new challenge.

Jeanne: Children are unable to do that on their own, correct?

Dr. Rauch: Grownups and children left to process on their own, often don't. They push ahead. But they may have a nagging feeling they're trying to make up for something: "Oh, no. What's the next bad thing that's going to happen?" Rather than having the ghost of disappointments past linger for children, and ourselves, we want to help them recognize the strengths that grew through adversity. We also want to remind ourselves how we stayed together as a family. How we helped our friends. What were the positives during those times? Because we want that optimism for our children and for ourselves.

Jeanne: What do you say to those so exhausted from this experience that the thought of talking about it is just too much? They want to move on.

Dr. Rauch: I would say, I totally understand why you feel that way. And we don't *have* to talk about it every day, every hour. But once in a while we need to pause, look at where we've been, recognize where we are, and prepare for where we're going. I think they'll be surprised that once they talk about it, especially in connection with other people — because that's what feeds our energy — they'll find that rather than feeling more depleted, they'll feel more energized.

Jeanne: What you're describing, in part, is building resilience. We hear so much about resilience I worry it's losing its meaning. As a child psychiatrist, how do you define resilience?

Dr. Rauch: So, let me first say what resilience isn't. Resilience isn't being unaffected by hard things. Rather, it's the ability to manage disappointments and continue to do things that bring meaning and purpose to our lives. And I don't want people to think there's such a thing as a resilient child. Resilience isn't a trait. Resilience is a capacity that caring adults facilitate for children throughout life. One child may find wearing a mask at school was difficult. Another child may find re-entering school after an absence is difficult. What is challenging for a child is very individual. The task of the caring adults is understanding what's hard for a child, be there for them, and help them move forward on their developmental trajectory.

Jeanne: And resilience is something built throughout life. In these conversations, whether with children or with other adults in our lives, we're building our own resilience as well, aren't we?

Dr. Rauch: Absolutely. We all faced adversity before the pandemic and will face future challenges too. We need to build the confidence that we have struggled well through difficult times. That makes us confident in our competence to face future challenges.

Jeanne: I'm thinking about 105-year-old Ruth who is featured in the Preschooler's video. She had no opportunity to process the death of her father in the Spanish flu pandemic. She says that had an adverse effect on her. We want our children to have fared better through this difficult time.

Dr. Rauch: It's a wonderful example. We know Ruth has also had a rich and remarkable life. So, in addition to facing challenges that maybe didn't get fully resolved, we shouldn't think that means a child's life is on a negative, lifelong trajectory. Ruth needed extra warmth and connection at the time her father died. She needed people to process that loss of her father over and over again — because it meant something different to her when she was five than when she was 10, 15 and 25. That's what she recognizes was missing for her.

Jeanne: And that's why the job is never done.

Dr. Rauch: It's never done for any of us. We're always rewriting our autobiography. And the caring adults in a child's or adolescent's life are the key editors.

Jeanne: We hope you'll check out the Discussion Guide available under each video. You can read it online or download it. Dr. Rauch and I wrote this guide to offer further insight into how you can help children and teens continue to build resilience — during and after the pandemic. It will also help you lead dynamic group conversations with other caring adults in kids' lives about the topics raised in our program.

This interview was edited for clarity and brevity

Jeanne Blake, Blake Works CEO and creator of *The Pandemic and Kids' Mental Health*, is a leadership communication coach, author and award-winning science and medical television journalist.

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