

Naomi Ruth Cohen
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Raising resilient children

Its a pleasure and an honor to be part of another Naomi Ruth Cohen gathering.

Thank you to Larry and Marilyn for their generosity of spirit that have brought us to this sacred day. This conference is always a simultaneous plunge into a deeper academic understanding and a deeper experiential compassion about a particular mental health issue. It elegantly and reliably blurs the lines between those in need of care and those who provide care, and every year it reminds us that we are all both, needing care and providing care, regardless of our titles or diagnoses.

(Speaking of which, behind the scenes for the last 15 years is a hero of mine, a woman who taught me that there can be an informal ministry in every job. Jill Randell, our former executive director here at Beth Emet, has done so much to make this conference great and this year will be her last. She is irreplaceable and I thank her for all that she has taught me about hard work, building bridges and caring for people.)

Despite being the lucky mother of three strong, lovable children, I feel a little awkward giving the opening remarks at a conference on Raising Resilient Children. It's kind of like being asked to make the opening remarks at a plastic surgery conference. No matter how good your remarks, you just can't just get up there with your love handles or your muffin top and double chin and pretend like its all good. As a mom, I feel blessed with many parts luck, a few parts hard work and lots of mistakes, still. So before I share my thoughts about raising resilient children, I want

to offer two giant caveats to my understanding of today's theme. Although our day is largely dedicated to the nurture side of the equation of raising children, anyone who has tried it knows there is a ton of luck that gets you headed down that path with a big head start. A child who is physically well, who is somewhat typical in temperament, appearance and capacity, is a giant advantage in launching the nurture part of human development. There is an amazing update on the social science and epigenetic research regarding the health effects of popularity in the New York Times this week. Multiple studies, conducted on various aspects of human health and longevity, show the dramatic mortality benefit of fitting in and feeling meaningfully connected to others.

The other major caveat in human development pertains to genetics. Although the role of genetics is still being illuminated on the neurobiologic and neuropsychiatric level, there is little doubt about its enormous influence on human mood and function. You don't need to see the randomized control studies to see, in the office of your local internist, the dramatic legacy of mental health and substance abuse disorders in families.

So, assuming a little luck and within the dictates of mother nature, how can we help our children be resilient in the face of life's challenges? For good and for bad, parents are the garden in which children sprout and flower and the kids are on to us from the first day. Adults who see the world as a dark or dangerous place tend to

communicate these core beliefs to their children. Adults who see life as a playground of infinite possibility are more likely to raise children with big horizons. Since you can't get to adulthood without experiences that injure and warp your sense of self and your narrative about the world, it is incumbent on any adult contemplating parenthood to have their own emotional house in order. Whether we do this through talk therapy, reconciliation, meditation, exercise, medication, self-reflection or through service to others, having clarity about where I end and you begin is an asset to all relationships, including and especially the parent child relationship.

Assuming an emotional house in reasonable order, what else can we do for our children to help them become adults who can navigate the surprises and betrayals of life, and keep their balance in the process. A long leash and unconditional love seem very useful. The long leash is the sometimes uncomfortable freedom we give our children to choose, to wander, to leave us, to make the inevitable mistakes with a foundational certainty as they venture forth that we believe in them, come what may, and that we adults can take care of ourselves while our children are busy growing up.

Unconditional love is the safety net that each of us craves and deserves as we step into the unknown, or recoil from failure or hurts or miscalculations. Parenting is an enormous responsibility but this burden is more than redeemed by the power of parental love to do good, to heal and reassure and propel our children forward in

the world. Just as our mistakes reverberate over time and space, the smallest good gestures are also magnified in the hearts of our children. I am still amazed, in my sixth decade of life, how intense and sustaining are the loving, affirming words and gestures sprinkled into my life by my own mother and father, who I still have, and still need.

Last among assets to the development of a resilient human is a core identity. In the modern world, this is a complex matter at best. Where our great grandparents could encompass most of who they were with a reference to just a few modifiers, like work, family and religion, we live in a time of radical nuance, diversity, globalization, social integration, and identity fluidity that was unimaginable a few generations ago. Despite this, it seems very grounding in the human experience to be able to name who you are with reference to commonly held notions, to belong to some place or some tribe, to have some affiliation with a meaning system beyond one's own imagination or whims. It can hail from any domain, but it seems to serve a vital function of identity consolidation and stability.

The last wonderful secret is that children are resilient, often despite their parenting. A man I know, after meeting the parents of a good friend, pronounced "after meeting your parents I now believe in neither nature nor nurture." To me this astonishing combination of human vulnerability and resilience is the most moving signature of our Creator. We can suffer the most searing pains, be utterly debilitated in our hearts or bodies, and still live and thrive and dominate and succeed. In 1990, the

wonderful writer Anna Quindlen, in an essay entitled Goodbye Dr. Spock, reflected on all the rules of parenting that in the end were so secondary to the charge. I would like to close with her sweet tribute.

There was babbling I forgot to do, stimulation they never got, foods I meant to introduce and never got around to introducing. If a black-and-white mobile really increases depth perception and early exposure to classical music increases the likelihood of perfect pitch, I blew it. The books said to be relaxed and I was often tense, matter-of-fact, and I was sometimes over-the-top. And look how it all turned out. I wound up with the three people I like best in the world, who have done more than anyone to excavate my essential humanity. That's what the books never told me. I was bound and determined to learn from the experts. It just took me a while to figure out who the experts were.