

How We Can Help Children Grow in the Wake of a Crisis

The following is excerpted from the article, “How We Can Help Children Grow in the Wake of a Crisis,” by Anya Kamenetz of The New York Times, August 22, 2022.

Research suggests people can experience positive change as a result of adversity. Children are no exception.

During the pandemic, young people have experienced massive disruption. More than [200,000 American children](#), and counting, lost at least one parent to Covid. Children with special needs often regressed without therapies and interventions. And many [kids suffered academically](#), from remote learning and missed class resulting from quarantines.



The rise of mental health concerns among children and teens now qualifies as [a national emergency](#). So the question is: As families try to recover, can kids grow from the difficulties they’ve faced?

People can experience positive change through crisis.

For centuries, humans have argued that meaning, wisdom and hope can be found through, not despite, struggle.

It’s a nice sentiment, but is there empirical evidence for this idea? In 1990, Lawrence Calhoun and Richard G. Tedeschi, now professors of psychology emeritus at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, [published a small study](#) examining 52 adults, 30 to 90 years old, who lost someone close to them. Most of the subjects reported growing stronger or more competent in several ways because of their grief. Dr. Calhoun and Dr. Tedeschi coined the term “post-traumatic growth” in 1995 to describe the phenomenon.

Those who have grown through crisis may still define their experience as a negative one, Dr. Tedeschi said, but [research suggests they often report positive change](#) in several areas. They may be proud of themselves for surviving, feel more connected to friends and family and discover deeper compassion for others. They might have greater appreciation for everyday life and a sense of new possibilities.

Parents can foster post-traumatic growth in children.

By around age 8, most children are developing the cognitive maturity required to see that negative experiences may have benefits, Dr. Tedeschi said. For teenagers, he added, this capacity is even greater. Adolescence is a period “when people are more open to rethinking things,” he said. “So they, in their openness, can be pretty good at recognizing growth.”

Dr. Tedeschi identified **five strategies** that he uses in his nonprofit, Boulder Crest Foundation, which works to foster post-traumatic growth:

- 1. Teach kids that adversity can bring gifts.** You might use stories from your life to explain how overcoming a difficulty can leave people stronger. Or, you can approach the same idea to teach kids about neuroplasticity, or the brain’s ability to adapt and change when we take on challenges and learn new things.
- 2. Prepare for difficult emotions.** Sharing experience is essential for post-traumatic growth. But to effectively discuss and process those difficulties, children need techniques to deal with emotions like sadness, rage and anxiety. For some children, a list of activities on the fridge that they can try when they are on the verge of a meltdown.
- 3. Listen. But don’t judge.** Ask questions about tough times. Listen to your kids without judging or downplaying anything, while expressing how much you care about them. This requires doing something that can feel counterintuitive: prompting children to disclose the details of a difficult experience, even more than once.
- 4. Help children understand their experience.** Trauma, as Dr. Tedeschi defines it, includes a loss of meaning: What you thought you knew about the world turns out to be wrong. You might ask, “What did this experience mean to you, all in all?” or “What do you know now that you didn’t before?” But, when helping your children assign meaning, be mindful that your values might not reflect what they are actually experiencing.
- 5. Encourage acts of kindness.** Over the years, Dr. Tedeschi has found that many people experience growth after a crisis when they choose to help others, especially those in similar situations. He suggested, for example, that a teenager who is catching up academically from the pandemic might try tutoring younger children.

Helping others lends perspective to our experiences and expands on the feelings of compassion that arise when we encounter difficulties. Plus, Dr. Tedeschi said, “Having an impact on other people is very gratifying to most of us.”