

# **Building Resilience, Self-Esteem, and Confidence to Support Well-Being**

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## Introduction

Throughout life, every person faces challenges, obstacles and difficulties that they must overcome. The ability to bounce back through adversity is called resilience. Resilience involves working through challenges in a proactive way which helps build confidence and mastery in overcoming difficulties. Being able to do so supports personal growth, good mental health, and contributes to positive feelings of self-worth and self-esteem.

Building self-confidence and self-esteem at an early age will be very strong protective factors for long term well-being. These are also the building blocks for resilience and independence, which are the foundation for a successful adulthood.

Supporting a person's interests and passions are important because they are motivating, engaging, conversation starters, friendship builders, skill building, employable, meaningful, calming, enhancing, and expandable. Being able to pursue interests and enjoyable activities adds meaning and pleasure to a person's life. Adding meaning and pleasure to daily life through interests supports good mental health, self-confidence and fosters a strong self-identity.

There should also be time allotted in the day for leisure activities to support and expand interests. Leisure activities connect us to family and community, develop skills, increase independence, and reduce stress. For autistic people, developing leisure interests and skills can be more challenging because skills are often not learned through the informal observation of others or by imitation; however, we can provide the structure and support for the successful pursuit of interests. Examples of structure would be the use of visual supports, a well-defined beginning and end, or a predictability or repetitive quality to the activity.

Daily physical activity, time outdoors, exposure to the arts, participation in sports, reading or being read to, opportunities to try new things, and having creative outlets can lead to greater life satisfaction which fosters happiness and well-being. Everyone needs things to look forward to. New experiences and a variety of daily activities encourage personal growth and wellness.

An autistic person needs to feel happy, secure, understood, and respected. These things come together to create a sense of well-being. Having a positive sense of well-being will help an autistic person in numerous ways. A person who feels happy and fulfilled tends to be more flexible, adaptable, calm and content, have higher self-esteem, and is resilient. Happy people who feel positive about themselves and optimistic about their lives move them beyond just surviving to thriving. The entire family will feel the effects of this too.

## Why Does an Autistic Person Need to Be Resilient?

Resilience is a self-replicating skill because once a person has successfully managed a challenging situation, they'll feel more confident about their ability to overcome difficult situations. As confidence grows, so does resilience.

Autistic people face specific challenges that can cause setbacks around feelings of confidence and self-worth. Living in a non-autistic world is overwhelming and frightening. A lack of accommodations leads to anxiety, stress and burnout. Successfully communicating one's needs can be difficult, particularly if there are not appropriate supports in place to be able to do so. A lack of predictability is stressful; new activities can trigger meltdowns or shutdowns.

Without resilience, autistic people often find life increasingly challenging, they may not be able to cope with new things or changes, and may want to withdraw from social situations. Building resilience early on in life can help a person feel confident to take on new challenges and succeed.

## Being resilient can help an autistic person:

- make their way through life's milestones in a positive way
- build self-confidence and self-esteem
- build a strong self-identity
- manage change or unpredictability
- recover from setbacks or disappointments
- reduce stress and anxiety
- succeed in challenges and also accept and learn from mistakes and failures
- understand the need for practice to develop a new skill
- set the stage for a more independent adulthood
- understand social-emotional boundaries and limits and work within those
- foster a sense of place in the world and a feeling of belonging
- build the confidence to take on new challenges
- transition from childhood to adolescence to adulthood

## What Factors Hinder Resilience?

**Invalidation** – This happens when a person's identity, self, safety, experience or beliefs are invalidated by others. This can happen through bullying, abuse, violence, or discrimination. An invalidating statement is "you can't" instead of "you're learning how to" or "I am learning how to teach you". Validating and reassuring a person not only builds confidence, but it is also essential for a trusting relationship.

**Assuming Incompetence** – This happens a lot to autistic people and can take a variety of forms such as assuming they can't make decisions, live independently, work, or have friendships or relationships. Assuming incompetence can become a negative and damaging self-fulfilling prophecy that robs an autistic person of confidence and the ability to try things on their own.

**Overprotection** – Parents or those in caring/supportive roles may want to protect autistic people from facing challenges or difficulties. Constant shielding can cause a person to lose confidence in their ability to do things. Self-doubt impedes resiliency.

**Negative messages** – Autistic people are often defined by their deficits rather than their strengths. They're told what they can't do rather than what they can. This type of messaging adds difficulty to acquiring resilience.

**Past failures** – This can work both ways – as a learning tool or obstacle to gaining resilience. If mistakes are emphasized and focused on by adult role models or important people in a person's life, it can have a negative impact on resilience. Negative responses to failure can be traumatic or cause ruminating thoughts. Failure needs to be put in perspective as a part of life and support provided to move on and try again. Talking about failure in a non-judgmental way and how to use the learning experience in a similar situation will support resilience.

**Perfectionism** – Autistic people can be very black and white in their thinking. Any mistake or setback may be perceived as huge. Wanting to be perfect and fearing failure around a specific activity can also be anxiety-provoking. It can prevent a person from trying the activity or if they do start it, from completing it because of worrying that what they do will not be good enough. The need to be perfect is often mistaken for avoidance or a behavior of concern.

## How Do We Build Resilience?

Building resilience is all about practice – also called critical mass. Critical mass is the point where an individual has gained enough information to be successful in situations, activities, or skills for which instruction has not been provided. When there has been enough instruction and multiple experiences, a tipping point can occur and the person can apply the skill in many new ways.

The best way to achieve resilience is through a series of controlled challenges, then adding to those challenges in small increments. Think of it like sports training – you go slowly and increase challenges through new exercises.

Ideally, when a person masters one challenge this will build their strength and confidence to take on the next challenge. It's especially hard for parents to watch their children struggle with tasks, but if parents always step in children don't learn and grow.

### There are several key concepts to teach children about resilience. They are:

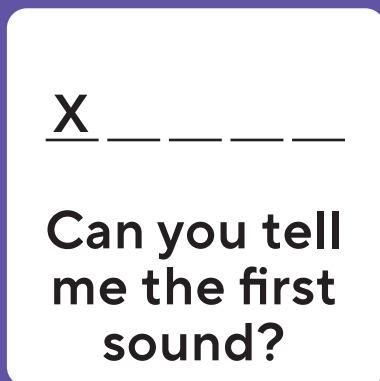
- Just because something seems difficult, that isn't a reason not to do it.
- With some help, you'll be able to overcome difficulties.
- No one masters a skill right away – they have to practice. Don't give up just because a skill takes practice to learn.
- When trying something new, it's ok to ask for help from a parent or someone you trust.
- Overcoming Something hard will make you feel really good and will mean you can do it again in the future and it will probably be easier.
- It's ok to compete and it's also fine if you don't win.
- If you don't get it right the first time, it's fine.

## Skills for Resilience

### Asking for Help

- Point out situations where people are asking for help. When did they need it? Why? Who did they ask?
- Build a support network of siblings and friends. Ask them to ask the person for help.
- Make a list of the things that the person is good at, and some questions that they can ask so that the interactions will be successful. This idea supports the series of controlled challenges that move in small increments.
- Use visuals that show strategies on what to do when you get stuck. Illustrate the steps to get help. Use any visuals that are meaningful to the person or a checklist.

Some examples are:



- Write a list of people that can be asked for help such as parents, teachers, coworkers, siblings or friends.
- Practice using "help" phrases such as "I don't understand." "I don't know what to do." "I don't know how to start." "I need help."
- Use video modeling to show how to use these scripts and/or visuals and what this looks like in action.

## Small Changes to Build Flexibility

Being able to adapt to change is a part of life. While autistic people need predictable and consistent routines, it's still important to be able to adapt to changes both planned and unplanned. Having this flexibility will build resilience and help a person to overcome changes and challenges.

Learning to be flexible can be practiced in a number of ways. Start with small changes. Introduce enough change to give an achievable challenge, but not too much that it causes a person to feel overwhelmed and want to disengage.

**Change the routine order occasionally.** Swap a visual around on the visual schedule. Ex. Change the day for a certain activity. Making these changes can also be used to make a choice. Being able to choose is another important life skill and something we do daily.

**Make a physical change.** This could be changing the location of a piece of furniture or where an object is in a room.

**Introduce a new activity into the routine.** There may be a struggle when this is introduced initially and engagement time is shorter. Consider putting this change into the visual schedule.

**Prepare for those unexpected moments.** Things in life don't always go to plan but that doesn't mean it has to be a disaster. Create intentional challenges for regular activities that can help teach the skills needed to respond to challenges and become more flexible when things don't go according to plan. For example, set the table but forget a utensil. Give the wrong item. This can also encourage the asking for help skill.

**Play games that have an element of chance.** Card games or games with dice will have an element of unpredictability to them. Different outcomes of winning and losing will help prepare a person for unpredictable outcomes.

## Self-Esteem and Confidence – An Integral Part of Resilience

Feeling confident is one of the cornerstones of building resilience. A confident person can cope when things go wrong, is more willing to try again, and may feel less anxious in new or unexpected situations.

Low levels of confidence can have a negative effect on a person's ability to learn new skills, particularly if they think that they can't do anything right or if something is too hard they'll never be good at it. People with low self-confidence may get upset easily when faced with challenges and setbacks and be less open-minded to trying new things. They may also be harder on themselves, engage in negative self-talk, and over-generalize incompetence in one area to their entire being, regardless of their ability.

Confidence will grow when an autistic person has success, uses their strengths and interests, and knows what they are good at. A person doesn't have to be good at everything to have self-confidence; they just need to know their strengths and how to use them effectively. Strengths don't have to be academic in nature either – they can be anything a person is good at and enjoys doing. Some examples of strengths are:

- building things
- connecting with animals
- photography
- a memory for details
- cooking
- dancing
- singing
- doing puzzles
- drawing
- reading

The list is endless! Strengths can be integrated into the day in many ways to support motivation, learning, happiness and well-being. Everyone needs to be motivated in order to put effort into something. The key to what motivates can often be found in a person's interests and hobbies.

Incorporating interests and hobbies when supporting autistic individuals can engage, sustain interest, and become a meaningful way to relate to them and build relationships.

When constructing visual schedules, allot time in the day for interests/hobbies. This can be also be a motivator for doing less preferred tasks beforehand.

## Figuring Out Strengths and Interests

Sometimes it isn't evident right away what a person's strengths and interests are or if they are known, how can those be expanded to keep life interesting. Observing, making lists, asking questions, and taking notes can help find those interests. Jackie Marquette's book *Becoming Remarkably Able* provides a structured way to figure out what are a person's strengths and interests using graphic organizers, questions, and exploratory activities all designed to "get to know you better".

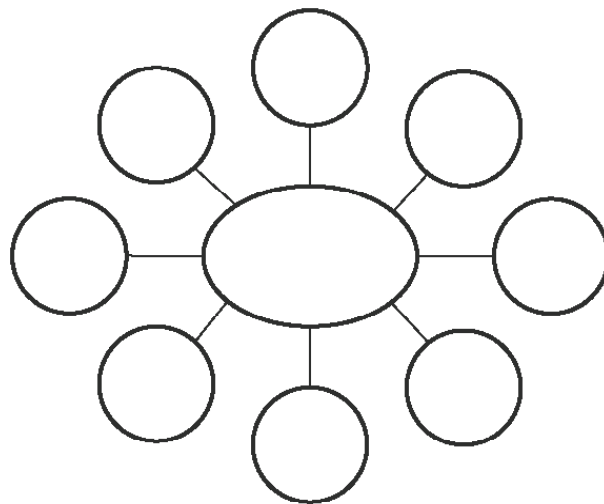
Here are some of Ms. Marquette's guiding questions to help recognize strengths and interests.

1. Is there something that excites the person each new day? If so, what is it?
2. What can the person do well?
3. What could the person do well if they had time to practice and learn?
4. What is their interest/passion?
5. If all fears and anxiety could be wiped about the person's future, what dreams would they explore or have help exploring?
6. If the person could do one thing in their life, what would it be?
7. Does the person lose track of time when involved in an activity? If so, what is the activity?
8. Do they love the challenge of figuring out a problem? If so, what?
9. Are they curious about a specific thing? Is so, what is it?
10. If there is a choice between learning something or being entertained, how often is each one of these options chosen?
11. Does the person pursue an interest beyond the time others might pursue it?
12. Does the person delight in learning something specific?

## Supporting and Expanding on Interests

Engaging in interests supports happiness and well-being. A person's interests are often their strengths. Pursuing things we are good at contributes to self-esteem and confidence, which are important components of resilience.

Using a graphic web organizer can help organize thoughts around what other activities may connect to an interest. An example of using this graphic organizer could look like this:



Music is the interest in the center circle. Around that word are the supporting activities – dancing to music, jumping on a mini-trampoline to a favorite song, yoga moves to music, listening to music, coloring to music.



## Ten Tips for Expanding on an Interest

1. Leave things lying around to be discovered.
2. Introduce things that are related or connected to a topic of interest.
3. Visit places of interest. You never know what may click or grab attention.
4. Volunteer – Volunteering can provide a behind the scenes look at an organization and give access to experiences that may not be available to the general public. The pace can be slower and the tasks more focused.
5. Read and visit the local library. They offer many programs and supports beyond just borrowing books and materials.
6. Attend all kinds of events from sports, music, lectures, plays and films. Not everything will be a success or liked, but it never hurts to try.
7. Participate in many different activities.
8. Travel if you can, even if it's just an hour's drive outside of your city or town. You're bound to notice something different.
9. Build on an interest. For example, a young person became interested in cats after attending a cat show. She then started following a cat foundation online. This lead to the eventual adoption of a cat, which then grew into a work experience job at a pet store, which then lead to a volunteer position with the cat charity after high school graduation.
10. Talk to people – ask what they do for hobbies, ask about organizations they belong to, be a spectator at something they participate in.

## Tools to Support Resilience, Self-Esteem and Confidence

### The Power Card Strategy

The Power Card Strategy involves using interests with visual aids to teach skills to autistic individuals. They are most effectively used with mild to moderate cognitive disabilities.

A power card is paired with a social narrative. Social narratives and power cards are a form of skill or behavior modeling: use a power card to show what a person **SHOULD** do, and not what they **SHOULD NOT** do.

The person will need frequent real life situations, including role playing, to practice the power card strategy.

### How to Create A Power Card

1. Choose a behavior or skill to teach through use of a power card.
2. Use a person's interest to choose characters or items to include in a social narrative and on a power card. (ex. Disney characters, superheroes, TV personalities, anime characters)
3. Write and illustrate a brief social narrative to model how a character would use the behavior or skill in a situation similar to when it is needed in the person's daily life.
4. Create the power card. Make a card that shows a picture or illustration of the person's interest and a few simple statements that recall the social narrative. The power card acts as a "reminder" about how or when to use the skill shown in the social narrative.
5. Review the power card with the person just before the skill or behavior may be needed.
6. Give the person feedback about how well they used the skill or behavior.

### Example of a Power Card

(Using Superman as the Superhero)

Even superheroes like Superman need to ask for help sometimes. He doesn't always know how to start an activity. When Superman can't do it all on his own, he can ask for help from a teacher or classmate.

When you need help, Superman wants you to:

1. Raise your hand.
2. Ask a trusted person for help by saying "I don't know what to do."
3. Ask to be shown what to do by saying "Show me what to do."

Superman is proud of you for asking for help when you need it.

[Power-Card-Blank-Template.pdf \(ocali.org\)](https://ocali.org/Power-Card-Blank-Template.pdf)

## Ideas for Building Self-Esteem

Show the positives of being autistic and give examples of the strengths that person has. Here is a great infographic that outlines the positive aspects of autism:

# The Positives of Autism

Understanding, accepting and celebrating different ways of thinking and doing can release the true power of the autistic mind. Here are some of the positive features of autism.

### Visual Skills

- Visual learning
- Detail-focussed

### Hyper focus

- Free from distraciton
- Concentration

### Novel approaches

- Unique thought processes
- Innovative solutions

### Absorb and retain facts

- Better recollection
- Superb long term memory

### Attention to detail

- Thorough
- Accurate

### Expertise

- Focused knowledge
- High level of proficiency

### Methodical approach

- Spotting patterns & repetition
- Analytical

### Observational ability

- Listen, look, learn
- Fact finding

### Creativity

- Distinct imagination
- Expression of ideas

### Integrity

- Loyal, honest
- Commitment

### Accepting of difference

- Less likely to judge others
- May question norms

### Tenacity and resilience

- Determination
- Challenge opinions



Keep in mind everyone experiences autism in a unique way. Not everyone of them will identify with every positive aspect of autism. All of us have individual skills, and characteristics that are as unique as ourselves.

## Positive Scrapbook

This can be a collection of anything that celebrates the person in some way – achievements, certificates, pictures of their interests, qualities, compliments, photos of activities- and put into a scrapbook. Other members of the family or people who know the person can add positives to the scrapbook.

## Helping Out with Chores and Tasks

Household chores can be a way to improve or foster self-esteem, ultimately leading towards more independence in the future. They can also be a great activity to share with grandparents, family and friends who might not necessarily know how to interact with an autistic person. Some chores may eventually be tackled independently, and some may always need to be a shared experience with a parent or caregiver.

Having a finished box or checklist to tick off completed items gives the visual support for knowing a task is done and a sense of accomplishment.

Some ideas for chores and tasks are:

- Watering plants
- Folding laundry – It is better to start with smaller items like socks and underwear, before you tackle a button down shirt. Sometimes children are more engaged when they are folding their own laundry first. Allow your helper to organize by size or color, or by person, if that seems to be something they would like to do. Doing it like this can support categorical thinking.
- Emptying the dishwasher – Start with cutlery (remove knives first), then gradually move to breakables.
- Vacuuming – generally for older children. Many children are fascinated with machines – but there are equal amounts that can't stand the sound or noise. Figure out if the child would be interested, and then provide a small area or area rug to start with.
- Making the bed – Use visual aids, show them yourself, video modeling, or use an [instructional video](#).
- Simple food preparation – No matter the level, most children will be able to tackle part of the food preparation for a snack or meal such as shucking corn or shelling peas. In fact, preparing food can be a great way to get a child interested in eating foods they might normally reject.

- Feeding a pet - Feeding and caring for that pet is another way for an autistic child to bond and feel responsibility for the animal. If the child is a bit fearful or uncomfortable with the pet, being a part of the food ritual is a nice way to connect without having to get too close.
- Odd jobs - These can be filling up soap dispensers, replenishing toilet paper rolls, emptying wastepaper baskets, removing dryer lint - whatever holds the interest.

## Developing Leisure Skills to Support and Expand Interests

Leisure activities are an important part of life. Engaging in activities that are fun, enjoyable and interesting fosters a person's well-being, happiness and satisfaction in life. Leisure skills can also support and expand a person's interests.

Leisure skills and interests have social benefits too because they can connect individuals who share the same passion. An activity brings together a group of people who share an interest and like to talk about it.

While everyone has personal preferences, the following specific qualities for an activity around an interest can make it more meaningful, predictable, structured, and successful.

### Understandable

Understanding an activity, the purpose of materials and what to do with them can sometimes be difficult. Some ideas to make things more understandable are:

1. Clear, static rules
2. Well defined beginning and end
3. Predictable or repetitive quality
4. Clear visual representation of what to do
5. Minimal verbal instruction
6. Structured activities

### Reactive

Reactive materials provide reinforcement through sensory feedback. This means when you do an action, something happens and it looks different. Examples are lights, sounds, movement and tactile sensation. Electronic and computer games provide this kind of feedback, although it can be a struggle to limit time on tech devices. (Note - see the Cybercrime booklet on how to limit screen time and develop options for breaks.) Music can add interest as well.

## Comfortable

Qualities that can increase comfort level are:

1. Challenging without being over-stimulating
2. Suitable for the person's ability level
3. Limited demands for complex social interaction
4. Opportunity for a sense of control or mastery

## Active

Young children need activities that use gross motor skills such as climbing, running and jumping. Rhythmic activities are also good choices such as swinging or swimming.

No matter what age an individual is, they need physical activity which helps reduce stress and anxiety, builds muscle, and increases flexibility and balance. Regular exercise can also contribute to a better night's sleep.

## Visual-Spatial

Repetitive manipulation of objects, putting things in order, or fitting objects into spaces can be very motivating. There are lots of toys and games that provide these qualities such as puzzles.

## Figuring Out What A Person Likes to Do

In the book *Developing Leisure Time Skills for Persons with Autism*, the authors recommend creating a Leisure Lifestyle Profile. The profile information is gathered through a parent/caregiver interview, an interview with the individual, direct observation assessment, followed by an assessment of the leisure and sensory preferences of the individual.

It's also important to assess what family and friends like to do as they often provide the expanded opportunities for activities. Some families like sports, concerts, nature walks, cooking, traveling, historical sites, gyms – the list is endless. By doing activities that the family likes to do, there will be more opportunities for the autistic person to practice, engage, and build skills.

## Conclusion

Every person is unique and has their own interests. In caring and supportive roles to an autistic person, it is our job to help create a path that leads to a meaningful, fulfilling life by supporting the things that bring happiness and a sense of well-being.

We have explored ways to build self-confidence and self-esteem by discovering a person's interests and incorporating them into their day. Think of self-esteem and confidence as very strong protective factors for long term well-being. These are also the base for resilience and independence which are the foundation for a successful adulthood.

By creating a framework through observation, recording, and visually organizing information, autistic people can be included, discover things about themselves and make decisions about their lives. Their voice is heard and their dreams supported with the assistance of these tools.

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