

The Resilient Child

Seven Essential Lessons and
Practical Tips for Building
Happiness, Success, and Social
Intelligence

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The Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public
Health

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DEDICATION

To my children, Marideth, George III, and Andi.

I pray that someday you will be lucky enough to have children who will teach you as you have taught me and bring you the happiness that you have brought me. But most importantly, I pray your children will show you the love that you have shown me.

And just remember: Happiness is a journey, not a destination, so never stop trying!

With Love, Dad

As time has passed Olivia Gayle, Bentley, and George IV have blessed this story.

To you I say the future is yours to make of it as you will. Never forget: Where strength and tenacity lead, destiny must follow.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I have already mentioned my three children, Marideth, George, and Andrea (Andi) who have taught me so much about life, but I must also thank my parents George S. Everly, Sr. and Kathleen Webster Everly, who gave me life and created the foundation for this book.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

George S. Everly, Jr., PhD, is considered one of the “founding fathers” of the modern era of stress management and human resilience. His books *Controlling Stress and Tension: A Holistic Approach* and *A Clinical Guide to the Treatment of the Human Stress Response* are considered academic classics and have been in print for 42 and 39 years respectively. Dr. Everly currently serves on the faculties of The Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine and The Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health.

Through over 45 years of research and clinical experience, Dr. Everly has identified and synthesized the common denominators in successful stress management and resilience. In his role as a mental health advisor in the wake of mass disasters such as the Oklahoma City bombing, Hurricane Andrew, Hurricane Katrina, the devastation of Kuwait after the Iraqi invasion, the terrorist attacks of 9/11, SARS pandemic of 2003, and COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 as well as his experience as a faculty member at two of the world’s most elite universities, he has gained a unique perspective on what it takes to be resilient and successful. Dr. Everly is uniquely qualified to offer insight into the nature of human resilience in the wake of extreme adversity and has now applied this expertise to the development of resilience in children so that they will be better able to deal with life’s adversities. His children’s book *Rodney Makes a Friend* (available on Book Baby and Amazon) teaches children how to

George S. Everly, Jr., PhD, ABPP, CCISM

foster resilience and build social intelligence. This book is designed to assist parents in raising happy, resilient, and successful children.

INTRODUCTION: Some Initial Thoughts on Being a Successful Parent

A Parent's Prayer

I pray that I may have the wisdom, the strength, and the compassion to be all that my children need in a parent.

I pray that I can show unconditional love and support without over-indulgence in worldly goods or setting inappropriate expectations for the nature of the world in which they live.

And when I am gone from this world, I hope to be judged not by how much I made, but by how much I gave; not by how many names I dropped, but by how many people hear my name and think fondly of me.

I hope my children will say of me: "He was wise, he was silly, and with all of his flaws he was still a good man. He was there for us. He taught us the value of honesty, fidelity, family, and friends, but above all else, he loved us. He was there when we needed him, and he will be with us always.

George S. Everly, Jr., PhD

Did you know that research has proven that if you get in the habit of writing down your thoughts and feelings during highly stressful times in your life, you can actually lower the stress you experience and gain greater insight into the things that plague you? I wrote "A Parent's Prayer" as I struggled to understand how I could be a better father, and perhaps even a better

person. Fortunately, the people closest to me taught me that one of the most important challenges on earth—that of being a parent—is best fulfilled by building a foundation consisting of two simple principles: *presence* and *unconditional love*. When a friend and colleague asked me what I meant by *unconditional love*, I realized that the answer must come from the heart, not the brain, and that the answer will be different for all of us. I realized that the answer must be felt, not understood. Finally, I realized that for those who have felt unconditional love, no explanation is necessary, for those who have not, no explanation may ever be adequate. (And I was going to be an accountant!)

As my eldest daughter and I sat on a hospital floor, helplessly waiting for her mother to take her last breath, those principles echoed in my head. My life was changed by her passing. My priorities changed, and I realized that failure as a parent was not an option. There was simply too much at stake. I also realized that, if necessary, parents must be willing to sacrifice today for their children's tomorrows. I later learned that I would willingly give up my preconceived notion of what my future would be, as well.

That same daughter subsequently married, and it was one of the happiest days of my life. At the rehearsal dinner, she gave me a gift that would warm any father's heart. It was a picture of her at about 2 years of age, eating an ice cream cone, although most of the ice cream was actually on her face. The inscription said, "Always Daddy's Little Girl." An

additional inscription read, “All I am today I am because of you.”

Although these words would be a tonic to any parent’s soul, I knew that who she is today and what she has achieved are the result of many people—mostly her mother, if I am to be honest—and many other forces. I wanted to better understand what those forces were. This book describes one parent’s journey of discovery, if not revelation. I wish I could say it was a journey based upon education and insight, because even though this is true to some degree, I made just about every mistake imaginable—so a warning to the reader...beware the zeal of the newly reformed. Just kidding!

A Little Background

I write this book as an ongoing story. This is not a textbook. If that is what you seek, I suggest *A Clinical Guide to the Treatment of the Human Stress Response* (Everly & Lating, 2019) for a review of the latest science on these and other related topics. Also see the blog on *Psychology Today Magazine*:

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/when-disaster-strikes-inside-disaster-psychology>

Rather, this book consists of the lessons learned from one person’s journey as a parent largely informed by experience, though admittedly filtered through the lens of neuroscience and clinical psychology as that was my training.

With that said, I guess I should start by telling you a little about myself, just to frame what I will say later

in this book. I grew up in Catonsville, Maryland, a small town southwest of Baltimore. Through the guidance of a dedicated visionary, Mayor William Donald Schaffer, Baltimore was a city in transition. The established port and the steel mills were the backbone of the economy, but we all knew Baltimore was undergoing a renaissance that would yield great opportunities. My father believed this, and he convinced me of it, too. He was very optimistic.

My father parented by example. He took me shopping, taught me the basics of accounting and finance, and we went to church every Sunday. He was self-reliant and reliable. Raised on a farm, he studied schoolwork by lantern and often traveled by horse and buggy. Yes, really! He started working away from the farm at age 12 by playing jazz saxophone on a local radio station. Before going to school in the morning, he would take the train into Baltimore City to study music with a professor at the famed Peabody Conservatory.

After high school graduation, my father joined the army and was sent to Europe during World War II. He landed on Omaha Beach during the D-Day Campaign. After the war, he worked two jobs (finance and music). Though my father's family came to America in the early 1700s, he was the first to go to college. Though offered an opportunity to go to Hollywood and be a musician in the "Big Band" movies of that era, he chose to stay local and study accounting. He believed the Hollywood lifestyle was not conducive to raising a family. Wow! Was he right! My dad was honest, loyal, and true to his word. He never missed a day of work,

and his two jobs never kept him from being a good dad. Though he worked a lot, he was always there when I needed him. He never missed any milestone event in my life. I will always remember that.

PARENTING TIP – *As a parent, your presence in your child's life matters. But quality of time spent seems to matter more than quantity. Make a point to be present for milestone developmental events. Those are the one's children remember.*

He guided the transition of the Baltimore Transit Company into the Maryland Mass Transit Authority. In doing so, he had the opportunity to transform a publicly traded for-profit company into a governmental agency. Ironically, in doing so he greatly limited his subsequent professional and financial futures. But that was the type of man he was. A man who was willing to sacrifice what was best for him for what was best for others. He was a child of the Great Depression. There were many like him. Tom Brokaw called them *The Greatest Generation*. I think he was right.

At my father's retirement party, one of his co-workers told me, that in the 30 years he'd known my dad, he'd never heard an unkind word said about him. I have to believe the term *The Greatest Generation* was coined with my father in mind. Sadly, my dad died prematurely at age 94. I think of him every day. I miss him every day.

My mother was a stay-at-home mom. A twin, she was born and raised in the "Deep South." I have very fond memories of visiting my relatives in Birmingham,

Alabama, and the small town of Manchester, Georgia each summer. Life seemed much simpler there. My mother had unlimited energy and an ever-present sparkle in her eye. She was an out of the box thinker, artist, and creative writer. Although illness took my mother away from me at a relatively young age, I remember her energy, happiness, and love of life, but most importantly the unconditional love she showed me.

The lifelong message given to me by both of my parents was their example of *reliability*, *fidelity*, and *commitment*—not just to each other, but to their son, as well. These concepts are easily translated into basic five principles:

1. If you give your word, you follow through. Promises do not have expiration dates.
2. Honesty is not the exception, it's the rule.
3. An income is something you *earn*, not something you are *owed*.
4. Take responsibility for your actions.
5. Your actions affect others, *always*. Therefore, think about the consequences of your actions, *always*.

A story my father shared with me on the day I completed my first doctoral training program emphasizes his support and optimism: When I was in tenth grade, I was considered quite the underachiever, and my dad was summoned to my high school one evening for a rather ominous meeting with my counselor. The counselor tried to persuade my father to remove me from high school and send me to trade

school. “George will never get into college, and if he does, he’ll never graduate,” he said.

My father thanked the counselor for his concern and his guidance but reassured him that my academic future was brighter than it might seem. In retrospect, I think it was my parents’ belief in me and their constant encouragement that helped me overcome crippling dyslexia and what would later become known as *Attention Deficit Disorder* (ADD). (Koretsky, 2014)

As far as I was concerned, I had a fantastic childhood—a *Leave It to Beaver* childhood (if this reference confuses you, watch the television re-runs). I was involved in organized athletics as a kid, but I was only an adequate athlete at best. In fact, I got my one and only athletic award at age 16—a patch showing I had made the baseball “All Stars” in my community. For me, that little felt patch stood for four years of hard work. I still have it on my desk.

Setting Children Up for Failure

Whenever I walk into my youngest daughter’s room, I would be struck by all of the trophies she received just for participating in swimming, soccer, and lacrosse. Basically, they are prizes for “showing up.” Of course, I’m happy if they helped her self-esteem (I don’t think they did. Kids know the difference between something earned vs. something given). But I worry about the expectations these trophies might set for later life. Will children learn that they deserve to be rewarded simply because of their presence, rather than their performance? Will they

grow up with a sense of entitlement that sets the stage for bitterness and disappointment in later life—when someone finally holds them accountable for how they perform, not just for showing up?

Recent research has shown that millennials and the GenZ generations are more distressed and depressed than any prior generation! Why? This is truly striking if you consider the plight of Brokaw's *Greatest Generation* who were children growing up in the Great Depression.

Are Safe Places and Trigger Warnings Protective?

Are *safe places* and *trigger warnings* really protective? I see no credible evidence that they are. In fact, there is evidence that they might be harmful. We create safe places in schools with the noble goal of protecting children from psychological distress. In such a well-intentioned process, do we actually deprive them of the ability to develop the coping skills necessary for when they find themselves in a world without safe places? Further, there is evidence that trigger warnings are not helpful. Feldman (2017) makes the case that acute offensive speech, which trigger warnings are supposed to protect against, does not do lasting harm as the nervous system is wired to withstand such potential injury (Paresky, 2017). Richard McNally (2016) argues that if you need trigger warnings, you may need more intense levels of assistance to protect you. The most compelling evidence that we are creating a detrimentally over-protective society is that compiled by Lukianoff and

Haidt (2018) in their brilliant work *The Coddling of the American Mind: How good intentions and bad ideas are setting up a generation for failure*. They show how over-protectiveness may psychologically disable children. Lastly, they show how such well-intentioned actions can actually cripple a free society by censoring free speech.

With all of this in mind I asked myself, “How can I best prepare my children and now grandchildren for a world that does not love them as much as I do—a world that might not recognize their inner strengths or their unique beauty and intrinsic value, a world that while trying to protect them may actually cripple them?”

PARENTING TIP: *“What you leave behind is not what is engraved in stone monuments, but what is woven into the lives of others.”*

– Athenian philosopher Pericles (ca 495–429 BC).

Keep this in mind the next time you have to choose between spending extra time at work vs. extra time with family.

Parents as Teachers

Who can be more woven into one’s life than one’s parents? How do we, as parents, weave strong, productive, and happy lives for our children, lives that are constructed with good resilient fiber? I’ve traveled the world—thirty-nine countries on six continents—from the frozen North to the sweltering subtropics, from refugee camps to palaces, from villages without running water or electricity to the most energetic and sophisticated cities in the world. During all of my

travels, I've tried to learn what makes people successful, and how parents can help their children become successful, resilient, and happy.

Every year, books are written about how to get what you want out of life, whether this means money, cars, education, or the perfect spouse. This book, on the other hand, is not about getting, it's about *giving*.

Of the many noble professions, teaching might be the most noble of all. Teachers enter the lives of children at the most formative and critical times, and provide knowledge, direction, and support that can help children grow, prosper, and realize their potentials, no matter what this might mean. Did you ever consider that as a parent, you are your child's first teacher? Well you are. And the home is your child's first classroom. If you think about it, parenting is also somewhat like coaching. A successful coach motivates athletes to achieve their best performance. Similarly, successful parents motivate their children to realize their full potential. Research on coaching and performance has found that the best motivators of young people appear to be:

1. the need to belong to a desired group (a need for affiliation),
2. the desire to be good at something (the need to be competent and possess personal effectiveness or self- efficacy), and
3. the ability to control stress so as to avoid getting *stressed out*, *psyched out*, or *burned out*, is also a necessary skill that affects motivation. How many promising careers in

academics, athletics, or even the performing arts were never realized because the person could not handle the associated stress and pressure?

I've lived long enough now to see many promising careers end in frustration because of a lack of psychological resilience. How many challenges were never undertaken because of the fear of failure? (I need only look at my own life to see a few of those.) Well, this book challenges you to be the teacher and coach your children need; maybe even the teacher and coach some of us wish we would have had growing up.

So, what are the keys to successful parenting and childhood development?

Although I knew that different children need different styles of parenting in order to help them become happy and successful, I was sure there were also plenty of common needs that all children share. So, I wondered if there were certain essential needs that, if satisfied, would define successful parenting? If so, what are those essential needs?

A famous psychologist, Dr. Abraham Maslow, believed that until the *basic* needs, such as the physical needs for food, shelter, and clothing, were met, it was impossible to fulfill the more advanced needs of human development. *Advanced needs* include the need to be appreciated and guided by others, the ability to care for others, the ability to think well of yourself, and achieving self-esteem. However, many children live in situations where their basic physical needs are often neglected, yet these children grow and prosper. They

learn to appreciate and care for others, just as they learn to care for themselves.

Some people might say that the need to feel safe is an essential need, and, of course, feeling safe is important to healthy development. But, certainly, there are many instances in which children have felt unsafe as they grew up. Yet these children did well and had satisfying lives. Some even learned to feel safe.

All kids need love from their parents or a parental surrogate. This is the foundation for other aspects of parenting. But we have all known folks (maybe even ourselves) who grew up without unconditional love, but somehow learned to love others.

What else is needed beyond the physical needs and the need to be safe and loved? Is there something even more essential?

Other than what has just been mentioned, I believe the most essential lesson any parent can teach their children is the ability to cope with stress and adversity. This is known as *resilience*, which can be thought of as the ability to be *resistant* to stress (a kind of immunity), as well as the ability to *rebound* from adversity. See Everly & Lating, (2019) for a thorough review of research. It also may be the critical difference between happiness or regret, success or failure. Wouldn't it be great if we could learn this in school? More on this later.

So, in addition to taking care of basic physical needs, safety, and love, I believe every parent has an obligation to help their children become stress resilient. This should not be confused with protecting

children from all adversity, however, as just discussed. *Adversity Happens*—to paraphrase a popular bumper sticker! There will come a time when your children will encounter adversity when they are not with you. The irony is that you'll know you've been successful in your job as a parent and teacher because your children won't need you in stressful situations as they once did. They will be able to handle adversity alone. If you want to be a successful parent, strive to make your role obsolete. Strive to raise your children to be happy, healthy, and productive—with you when possible, without you when necessary.

How do we do this? The answer, I believe, is we must teach children to develop the *inner strength* that makes all things possible. Personal resilience is essential!

Resilience

What is resilience and why is it important? To reiterate, resilience is the acquired immunity against disabling stress; it is also the ability to rebound from adversity. It is an inner strength that increases the likelihood of success in anything you do. One of the foundations of resilience is the belief in your own personal effectiveness or agency, that is, the belief in your ability to organize and carry out the actions required to achieve the things you need and want in life. This perception of personal effectiveness, control, or influence is an essential aspect of life itself. People guide their lives by their beliefs of personal effectiveness. According to the noted psychologist Dr.

Albert Bandura:

“People’s beliefs in their self-efficacy [personal effectiveness] have diverse effects. Such beliefs influence the courses of action people choose to pursue, how much effort they put forth in given endeavors, how long they will persevere in the face of obstacles and failures, their resilience to adversity, whether their thought patterns are self-hindering or self-aiding, how much stress and depression they experience in coping with taxing environmental demands, and the level of accomplishments they realize” (A. Bandura, 1997, p.3).

The question with which I wrestled was: “could I develop a set of guidelines or recommendations that would help my own children develop resilience?” So, I tried. As I would develop the concepts and the recommendations, I would include them in my lectures. Invariably, people would approach me at the end of the lecture and say how much they enjoyed the remarks on resilience. Some would even ask for the slides themselves. Then, one day, I gave a presentation to an audience of about 900 people. And as usual, at the end of my presentation I included some of the recommendations for resilience. As I was leaving the auditorium, a 6’3” uniformed state trooper approached me with tears literally in his eyes. He said, “Sir, I am a single father. My wife died in an automobile accident two years ago and I have three young sons at home. I worry everyday about how to raise them. I think I finally understand. Thank you, sir.” Then a tear came

to my eye.

Our journey to understand resilience consists of seven lessons that I believe you can teach your children and in doing so can help them build true inner strength...resilience, and in the process build social intelligence, happiness, and success.

Lesson #1: Develop strong relationships with friends and mentors.

Lesson #2: Learn to make difficult decisions.

Lesson #3: Learn to be reliable and take responsibility for your own your actions.

Lesson #4: Learn that the best way to help others, and yourself, is to stay healthy.

Lesson #5: Learn to think on the bright side (optimism) and harness the power of the self-fulfilling prophecy.

Lesson #6: Believe in something greater than yourself.

Lesson #7: Learn to follow a moral compass: Integrity

I have come to agree with the notion that our lives are defined, and our legacies shaped, not by what we acquire in our lives, but by what we pass on to others. This book was intended to be my gift to my children. I hope they find it valuable. I hope you will find it valuable, too.