

Here Be Dragons

By Dr Justin Coulson

In ancient times, explorers would write "here be dragons" on maps. It was a signifier. Beyond this point: danger. Stay away.

A lot of parents do the same thing with their children.

Our kids run into dragons every day. A bully. A hard diagnosis. A friendship that falls apart. A challenge that feels way too big for them. These dragons are real and frightening, and when they appear, we reach for our sword.

It's instinctive. It's our natural reaction because we love our children and we want to protect them. Besides, we're bigger, stronger, more experienced. We've slain a few dragons ourselves. And watching your child face one is genuinely awful - it makes us anxious, so we charge in because we can, and because it feels like love; like good parenting. And while in some ways it is... in other ways, it's not.

You already know what I'm going to say next. It's your child who needs to do the dragon slaying.

Here's what the research actually shows. Psychologist Ann Masten - one of the world's leading resilience researchers - has spent decades studying children who overcome adversity. Her conclusion, supported by a substantial body of evidence, is that resilience isn't a personality trait some kids are born with. It's built. It develops through experience. Specifically, through the experience of facing hard things and coming out the other side. Reviews of the resilience research literature have consistently pointed to responsive and supportive parenting as the single most robust predictor of resilient adaptation - but responsive and supportive doesn't mean running in to fight the dragon. It means being there while your child fights it themselves.

How do we ensure we're responsive and supportive?

When our child is scared of a new dragon in their life, we listen. And then, together, we form a battle plan. We ask them to come up with potential ways forward. How can they slay the dragon? And when they're stuck, we offer suggestions.

The truth is that sometimes the kids are on board. They *want* to slay their dragons. But other times... not so much. They don't contribute to the conversation. They're not interested in finding solutions. They want protection.

At this point, we need to determine how important the dragon-slaying activity is. For little kids, staying at kindy or pre-school is a big deal. Or saying hi to a new classmate. For bigger kids, applying for the job, trying out for the theatre production, submitting the piece of art, playing in the Eisteddfod, asking someone out on a date. All of these things mean our child runs the risk of rejection and failure. They're likely to look incompetent. It could end up going pear-shaped.

Yet it's precisely that experience that builds resilience. I'd go further: resilience doesn't feel resilient when you're in it. But you don't know you're resilient until you try!

A 2021 systematic review and meta-analysis of resilience programmes for children and adolescents confirmed what Masten's work has long suggested: resilience involves *cognitive (thinking)* and behavioural aspects, and it can be built through experience.

The cognitive side includes things like how a child interprets a setback - whether they see it as permanent and catastrophic, or hard but manageable.

The behavioural side includes what they actually do when things get difficult: do they ask for help, try a different approach, keep going? Both of these develop through practice. But they have to be doing the hard work themselves.

You can't build the skill by eliminating the opportunity to practise it.

The practice, however, is almost always better when someone is standing there supporting you.

Lancelot wasn't born brave. Neither was Perceval. They had mentors who stood beside them, showed them how to hold the sword, walked them toward the dragon - and then stepped back and let them fight.

That's the job we have as parents. Polish the sword. Arm them with the shield. Teach the technique. Stay close. But let them feel the weight of it in their own hands.

Resilience feels hard and uncomfortable and uncertain. That's the point. That discomfort is where the growth is. Kids don't become brave by watching us slay dragons. They become brave by slaying a few themselves.

So the next time a dragon shows up in your child's life, resist the urge to charge in. Ask what they think they should do. Offer your perspective. Stay nearby. And then let them carry that sword and shield.

Let them discover for themselves how strong you feel when you slay your first dragon.



Dr Justin Coulson is a dad to 6 daughters and grandfather to 1 granddaughter. Justin travels all around the country, speaking at schools to students, educators and parents about wellbeing and relationships. He is also the parenting expert and co-host of Channel Nine's Parental Guidance, and he and his wife host Australia's #1 podcast for parents and family: The Happy Families Podcast. Justin has written 11 books about families and parenting - with the latest about [raising boys](#) out now! For further details visit happyfamilies.com.au.