

# From Setbacks to Strength: Building Resilience in Middle School

Elizabeth Malesa, Ph.D.

Managing Director & Licensed Clinical Psychologist

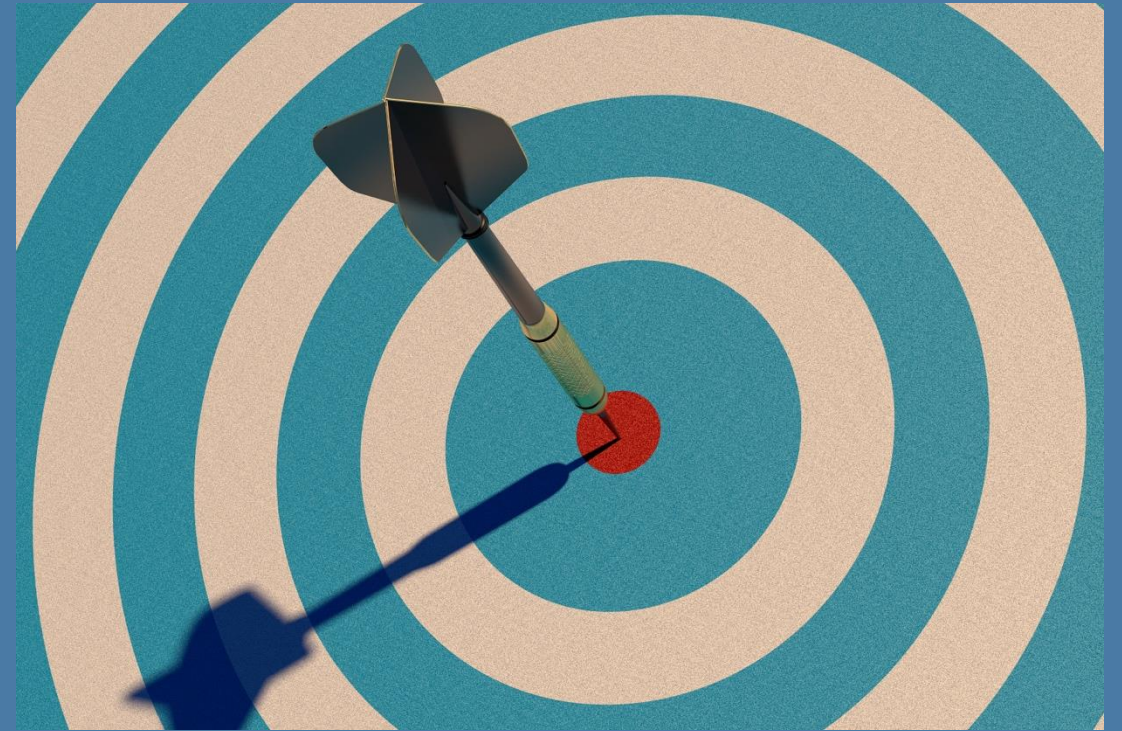
Andrew Ross, Ph.D.

Licensed Clinical Psychologist



# Goals

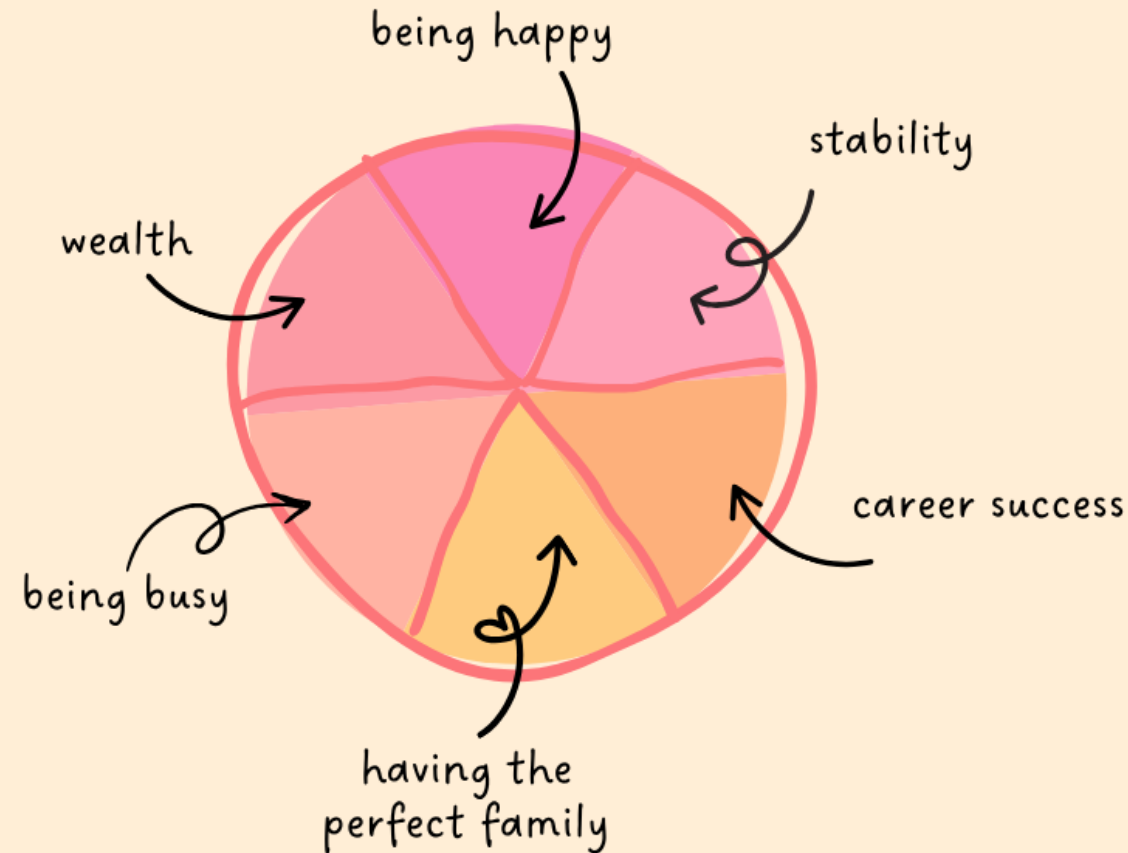
- Empower parents to recognize and support resilience.
- Reframe struggle as a natural (and *necessary*) part of growth.
- Provide practical language and strategies for home use.
- Facilitate thoughtful discussion and peer connection.



# What are your goals for your child?



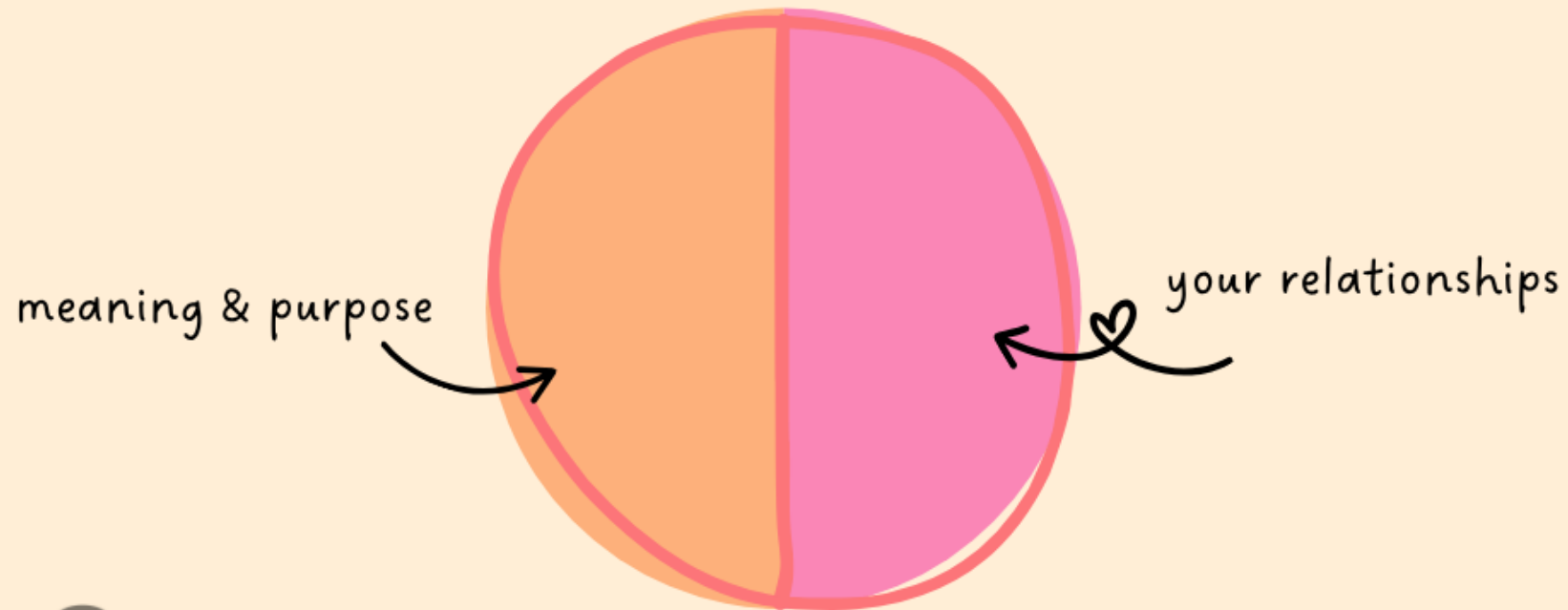
# What people **think** makes a good life



6seconds.org

Inspired by The Good Life (2023) by Waldinger & Schulz)

# what **really** makes a good life



6seconds.org

Inspired by The Good Life (2023) by Waldinger & Schulz

"Relationships and adaptations are deeply interconnected: how we respond to hardship is shaped by the support around us, and *our capacity* to form and maintain bonds is part of how we adapt."

Miller & Olsen, *Six Seconds*



# What is Resilience?

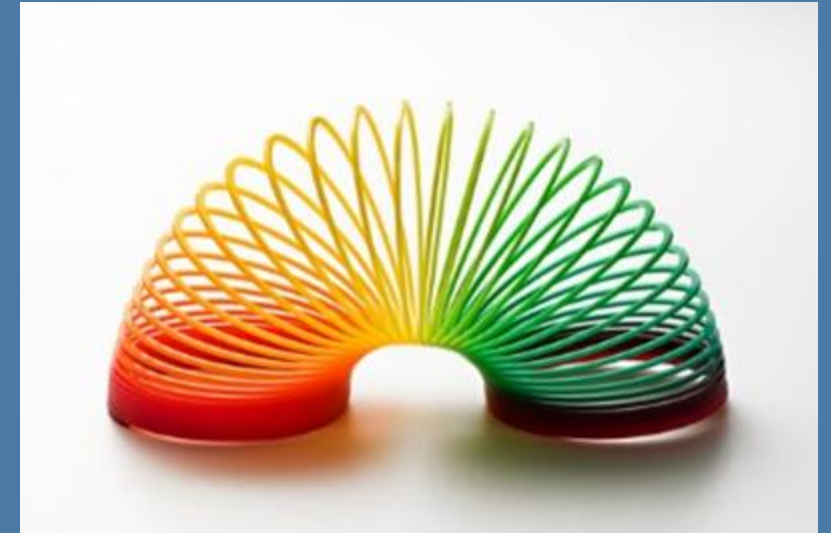
Skills, attributes and abilities that enable individuals to adapt to hardships, difficulties and challenges \*

These things, or influences, may be internal or external.

Skills include:

- Proactiveness and self-efficacy
- Self-regulation of emotion and behavior
- Adaptability/flexibility
- Positive connections with parents, peers and community

\*Definition by Alvord & Grados, 2005



# 10 WAYS TO IMPROVE YOUR CHILD'S RESILIENCE

- ✓ Deepen your connection
- ✓ Build Self-Efficacy
- ✓ Reframe failure
- ✓ Conquer negative thinking
- ✓ Encourage growth mindset
- ✓ Cultivate flexibility
- ✓ Foster emotional wellbeing & regulation
- ✓ Encourage finding meaning and purpose
- ✓ Promote social engagement
- ✓ Turn academic stress into skill building

@alvordbaker



# Deepen Your Connection With Your Child

1



- Secure, supportive relationships are foundational
- Be present, listen without judgment, and validate feelings (“That sounds really hard”) before offering solutions
- Spend quality time together, including through child-led activities
- Call attention to mature and responsible behavior
- Model healthy communication and repair

# Build Self-Efficacy by Stepping Back With Intention

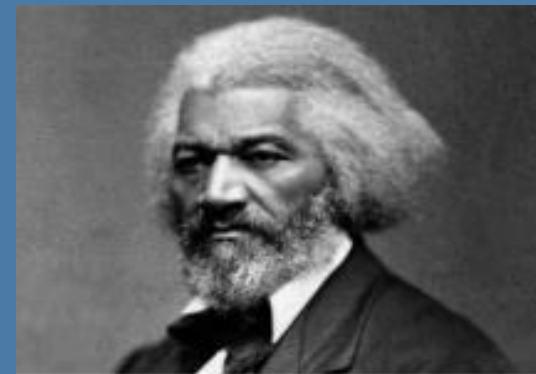
2

- Protecting vs Stunting growth
  - Seek to scaffold
  - Allow for failure
- ***Discomfort builds strength***
- Knowing when to step in – and when to step back
  - Moving from "I will do this for you" to "I believe in you"



“If you wish to make your son helpless, you need not cripple him with a bullet or bludgeon, but simply place him beyond the reach of necessity and surround him with ease and luxury.”

Frederick Douglass, 1893



# Reframe Failure



- Use language that normalizes failure and frames it as something to expect in life
  - “There are going to be things that we fail at in life, whether it’s the 1<sup>st</sup> time or the 5<sup>th</sup> time we try”
  - “Does failing at this *now* mean you’re going to fail at this *forever*?”
  - “Did you *actually fail* at this, or did you just not do as well as you hoped?”



# Help Conquer Negative Thinking

- Thoughts are **not facts** — they are *interpretations*
- Increased sensitivity to **peer feedback**, comparison, and social status
- Academic pressure and fear of failure
- Strong emotions with less capacity to regulate them yet



# Help Conquer Negative Thinking



- Middle schoolers' especially prone to common cognitive errors:
  - Black-and-white thinking: “I failed, so I’m terrible at math”
  - Catastrophizing: “This mistake ruined everything”
  - Emotional reasoning: “I feel it, so it must be true”
- Ask Reframing Questions: teach kids to challenge thoughts with curiosity
  - “What evidence do you have for that thought?”
  - “What might be another explanation?”
  - “If a friend said this about themselves, what would you say?”





# Encourage Growth Mindset

- Research links a **growth mindset** to greater psychological well-being and resilience
  - “I can improve with effort”
  - "I can't do this yet"
- Praise effort and strategies
  - “You worked hard and tried new steps”
  - Work with kids to think critically



# Cultivate Flexibility and Adaptability

6

- Allow kids to experience uncertainty at home
- Build flexibility in everyday moments
  - “What can we do differently?”
  - “Are there any other possibilities?”



*Plan A → Plan B*

*Encourage creativity*



# Foster Emotional Wellbeing & Regulation



- Demonstrate persistence in spite of stressors
- Model conflict resolution with partners and friends
- Narrate problem-solving & self-regulation efforts
- Encourage and model self-care
  - Sleep
  - Exercise
  - Healthy eating
  - Self-compassion



# Foster Emotional Wellbeing & Regulation



- Normalize and Validate Emotions
  - "That makes sense"; "It does hurt when we are left out"
  - "There are some things that are just out of our control, which is really frustrating, and there are other things that we can control"
- Notice, without judgment, and stay curious
  - "What were you feeling during that situation?"
  - "What do you notice happening in your body when you're anxious?"



# Encourage Activities that Bring Meaning and Purpose



- Parents can model engagement in activities that are fulfilling and create purpose
- Encourage children to pursue activities that they find meaningful, align with their goals, and foster conscientiousness
- Encourage and reinforce special talents and opportunities to build mastery



# Promote Social Engagement & Awareness



- Strong **social skills** and a **sense of belonging** protect kids during the middle school years
- Parental role changes from manager to mentor
  - Discuss qualities you look for in friends
  - Model conflict resolution in friendships
  - Normalize evolving nature of friendships
- Encourage cooperative activities (clubs, teams, skills-based groups) to enhance social skills and emotion regulation



# Turn Academic Stress into Skill Building Opportunities

10

- Balance validation with independence
- Teach children to advocate for themselves
- Encourage effort without taking over
- Limit comparison



# Turn Academic Stress into Skill Building Opportunities

- View the challenge as specific (not global) and evolving
- Reframe challenges and call attention to strengths
- Utilize the supports that are available
- Set realistic educational & vocational goals
- Caregivers and teachers can collaborate to foster authentic self-esteem



# Additional Resources & Supports

- *Conquer Negative Thinking for Teens* – Mary Alvord, PhD & Anne McGrath, MA
- *The Action Mindset Workbook for Teens* – Mary Alvord, PhD & Anne McGrath, MA
- *Middle School Matters: The 10 Key Skills Kids Need to Thrive in Middle School and Beyond--and How Parents Can Help* – Phyllis L. Fagell, LCPC
- *How to Manage Your Social Power in Middle School* – Bonnie Zucker, PsyD



# Additional Resources & Supports

- Resilience Builder Program®
  - Group therapy program backed by years of research to support efficacy
  - Uses Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) strategies to teach resilience-based skills
  - Builds specific skills that increase resilience in a group setting providing opportunity to practice with peers and obtain feedback from peers in vivo
    - Builds flexibility, social competence, problem solving, emotional regulation, stress and anxiety management
    - Teaches parents how to support their children in generalizing each skills, week-by-week





A photograph of a sailboat's deck and mast at sunset. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a bright glow and long shadows. The deck is made of wooden planks, and a red rope is visible. The ocean is dark blue with whitecaps. A large sail is partially visible in the upper right corner.

“On the other side of a storm is the strength that comes from having navigated through it. Raise your sail and begin.

Gregory S. Williams



# Closing & Key Takeaways

- Resilience = growth through struggle.
- Parents are guiders, not fixers.
- Encourage and support ongoing strength-building.
- Consider how your goals for your children promote their resilience



# Resiliency is Essential!



# Discussion & Reflection

- What struggles has your child faced recently?
- How did you respond?
- What worked well—and what might you try differently?

