

TEACHING OUR CHILDREN TO BE RESILIENT

'Dear Mr Wilcox, Jeremy is not ill ...'

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U WISH schools are certainly not unique when we speak of the 'epidemic of anxiety' in our communities. When I speak with senior colleagues in non-Jewish schools (and I have had the privilege of serving three such non-Jewish institutions in my career), they speak of the same concerns.

Young adults facing summative examinations such as VCE or HSC being hospitalised for mental health-related challenges; a drop-off in camp attendance for fear of sharing with the 'wrong child', or being fearful of the distance from home; an onslaught of parental interventions regarding who their child should (or should not) share a class-placement with – these are just some of the manifestations of the anxiety epidemic.

Of course it is not confined to the school yard. Whereas a few years ago a major reason for workplace absenteeism was back problems, now it is stress. My friends in managerial positions beyond the education bubble tell me that a common complaint from more junior colleagues is a feeling of being 'overwhelmed'. I do not recall stress-related absences a decade ago but now one hears it in every sector.

There is no doubt that the climate has certainly changed. Social media reinforces to us the highlights (and only the highlights) of other peoples' lives. Who posts a Facebook of themselves with a headache, or their children not tidying their room despite having been asked 14 times in the last hour?



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health consequences. And on the other hand, children hope to rely on parents to save them from all trouble and sorrow. This creates a perfect storm of emotional instability and a weak toolkit to exploit in times of adversity.

Was it always thus?

I look back to my school days in a northern English Anglican grammar school. I recall asking my mother to write a note excusing me from rugby. (Which of my Jewish friends would have chosen rugby over badminton or table tennis in the warm embrace of the heated sports hall?) When the long-suffering Mr Wilcox opened my mother's sealed envelope, he showed me her letter with a wry smile:

"Dear Mr Wilcox," the letter began. "Jeremy has asked me to write you a note saying that he is ill and unable to partake in rugby.

"He is not ill.

"His rugby kit is in his locker."

Devastated though I was about the betrayal, I nevertheless learnt a lesson in resilience. I also learnt not to fully trust my adults (itself a healthy lesson) and also to see humour in despair. I learnt that unpleasant though the rugby lesson may be (tip: avoid the ball), the despair was

momentary and in the words of our sages, "This too shall pass."

Now please do not misunderstand me. I am not advocating the School of Hard Knocks for the modern child. Our way in the Jewish community of helping our children to develop adolescent resilience is not to do as some schools do – sending them to a rural setting where children have to kill their own food for a year. No, instead we send them to Israel where falafel and shule is in abundance. But nevertheless, there are things that we can do.

(Incidentally, students at my own school used to complain about the food in Israel. "All we get is schnitzels," they would complain. "Schnitzels, schnitzels, schnitzels." Now that we go to China as a part of the global experience on the way to Israel, and suffer the food there, they commend the Israeli food – after their China experience, their feedback is now that "Once you get to Israel, the food is amazing – you get schnitzels, schnitzels, schnitzels!" Now there's a lesson in resilience: perspective.)

Regardless, the development of resilience is not just about perspective, salutary though this lesson is. Resilience is taught and inculcated from a young age.

I exhort parents, whose primary-aged

children are reluctant to go on camp, to have practice sleep-overs at family members' and friend's houses first. I encourage families whose children are reluctant to enter swimming carnivals to really embolden them to try.

Now be assured: I do not for a second suggest that a child who attends camp or a swimming carnival is going to be anxiety-free in later life.

But what I do mean is that a family that celebrates discomfort, encourages a positive outlook on a negative situation, supports children to persevere when they are not happy all of the time (who, in real life, ever is?), is a family that is teaching resilience. And their children will deal with the knocks that the social space and the work place inevitably brings with aplomb.

And this same family that switches off social media – or at least reflects on the time spent on it through apps such as Moment or Quality Time – and has restrictions on usage, as well as conversations about real life versus the digital world – this is a family preparing for a balanced future.

What is so reassuring and inspiring is that most families are this. They are thoughtful, responsible, reasonable, reflective, and engage in perspective exercises. These are healthy families.

But we are all on a journey. None of us have made it. I am a parent and it is the most challenging, and conflicting, and depressing – as well as the most elating, inspiring and healthy – role that I undertake.

So my message is this: the next time your child asks you to write a note excusing them from an activity, consider the inspirational example of my mother.

The next time that your child wants to call you from school about a problem (assuming that they are using the phone against the school rules, but that's another discussion), don't take the call; let them sort out the problem themselves, or let them wait until they get home to share.

And next time you see someone's exemplary life on social media, imagine them stuck on the Monash Freeway with a blinding headache while their crazed sugared children wreak voluminous and culinary havoc in the back seat.

It happens to us all, and it is very reassuring when we realise that.

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Fed by our need for releases of dopamine that the checking of our phones elicits, our perception of the wellbeing of others is high, and our relative perception of our own realities is conversely bleak.

So we face a dual problem: on the one hand our desire for permanent and unabated happiness regularly hits the brick wall of reality, with negative mental