



BRAIN HEALTH BOOST



Play Builds Resilience During Times of Stress and Hardship

*The Brain Health Initiative (BHI) is working to develop brain healthy communities, creating a culture that promotes brain health protective factors and decreases risk factors, thereby improving brain health, optimizing brain performance, and preventing and fighting brain illness across the lifespan for the Florida Suncoast region and beyond. **There have been many questions through the two-year course of the pandemic about how children will emerge from an era of lockdowns and mask wearing. Today, we dive into resilience and ways to help young people adapt to hardships.***

“We don’t stop playing because we grow old, we grow old because we stop playing.” – George Bernard Shaw

People are born with a desire to master their environment, to control their fate instead of being a slave to forces that surround them. But what happens when, after someone gets comfortable in the world around them, reality begins to change or is altered drastically in an instant?

That’s when resilience is tested or revealed. Resilience is the capacity to recover quickly from hardships and difficulties such as disruptive life events. It is a key component of human development.

Early in life, children use play as means to master their environments, learning skills, testing limits, and satisfying their curiosity. Could play help children reset their ability to be resilient even after mastery eludes them?

“If you think about what resilience is all about, resilience is mastering your environment,” said Dr. Jack Shonkoff, Professor of Child Health and Development and the Director of the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University. “It’s building the skills to be able to cope, building the skills to have strategies, to deal with your own reactions, to be able to have some control over what’s going on around you. And none of that would develop as well as it does if you depended on just being taught how to be resilient. Your ability, your natural ability to play, is one of the most important strategies that we have developed to build resilience in the face of adversity.”

According to Shonkoff, there are three key concepts to resilience and healthy development. They are:

- Supportive relationships with parents, guardians, caregivers, teachers, etc.
- Manageable levels of stress
- Development of core skills

Effective play touches all three concepts. In infancy, children make sounds and “talk” to their parents, handle an item and give it back, look around and smile. Then, they begin crawling around and exploring their environments. During this stage, parents create a safe atmosphere but eventually begin letting the child become more independent and play on their own. Later, play incorporates games with rules, which allow children and teens to learn about taking turns, following instructions, and working together with others.

Research has found that hands-on play typically involves trial-and-error, which gives students a safe environment to work through frustrations. Creative play also allows children to pursue their own ideas to a successful conclusion. They can work out and process what may have happened to them or around them during a particular day. As a result, play enables children to acquire some critical developmental skills that can serve them for the rest of their lives.

Play doesn’t have to end in adulthood. Hobbies, games, meditation, boating, skiing, hiking, biking, cooking, gardening, dancing, making music or creating art, golfing, fishing, or just getting out in nature can help ease stress, build resiliency, and lead to lifelong brain and body health and well-being.

“In the best of all worlds, play doesn’t end until you die, because play is a way of thinking and engaging with the world,” Shonkoff said. “Play is one of the most important vehicles for having some sense of mastery and control over the world that you live in, which is getting us very close to the definition of what resilience is all about.”

So, regardless of your age, get out and play and, better yet, bring a friend with you.

WHAT YOU CAN DO TODAY TO PROTECT YOUR BRAIN HEALTH

What types of play help children build resilience? The BHI offers these experiences for children of all ages to work on problem solving, self-regulation skills, and forming relationships.

- **SIMON SAYS.** This simple game allows children to develop self-regulation skills such as working memory and control of inhibitions.
- **BUILDING WITH BLOCKS.** Using Legos, blocks or other tactile toys offers opportunities for problem solving and setting goals. If an adult participates in the building, the child also is strengthening a relationship.
- **DEEP BREATHS.** Breathing exercises, yoga and stretching helps children relax and get a break from stressors.
- **NAME THAT EMOTION.** Books, games and conversations about identifying emotions give children the chance to understand what they are feeling.
- **MAKING MUSIC.** Listening to music, dancing, singing and playing musical instruments allow children to feel positive emotions and experiment with different types of self-regulation.
- **IT'S ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS.** Any other activity that builds a stronger bond between the child and primary caregiver.

BE BRAIN HEALTHY and adopt a lifestyle that includes thoughts, behaviors, emotions, responses, and language that promote brain health protective factors:

- Stress resilience
- Nutrition
- Physical activity
- Sleep
- Social connection
- Emotional wellbeing
- Meaning and Purpose
- Cognitive stimulation and creativity
- Engaging with nature
- General health
- Positive impacts

About the Brain Health Initiative (www.brainhealthinitiative.org)

The Brain Health Initiative (BHI), a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, uses a cutting-edge approach to protecting brain health, promoting brain performance, and preventing and fighting brain illness across the lifespan. The BHI is building brain healthy communities, cultures that foster brain health protective factors and address risk factors, thereby improving brain health and optimizing brain performance outcomes for the Florida Suncoast region and beyond. Join the **Be Brain Healthy** movement, **because brain health matters, and lifestyle makes a difference.** To view all Brain Health Boosts [click here](#).