

Raising Resilient Children.

Noted author Dr. Robert Brooks to speak in Lexington

By Laurie Atwater



**April 8th,
7:00 p.m. – 8:30 p.m.
Jonas Clarke Middle School
Auditorium
Hosted jointly by the Lexing-
ton PTAs/PTOs**

Dr. Robert Brooks, author of *Raising Resilient Children* has lectured extensively on the subject of resiliency in children and will visit Lexington on April 8th. I had the opportunity to chat recently with Dr. Brooks by phone from his home outside of Boston and he talked passionately about his hopeful message for parents and kids.

It is a subject that is more and more resonant as parents struggle to raise children in an increasingly competitive and stressful world. He counters much of the current hysteria with profound truths delivered in a practical voice. For anyone who loves their kids and fears (perhaps too much) for their futures, this lecture will inspire you to hang in there, see your kids for who they are and help them prepare. As a result, you too may become more resilient!

Resiliency, the power to bounce back when faced with adversity is widely acknowledged as one of the most important contributors to good mental health and happiness.

“Who hasn’t experienced adversity in this complicated and stressful world,” Dr. Brooks says. What’s important is how we deal with mistakes. “Kids who are resilient and feel a sense of high self worth basically believe that you can learn from mistakes,” Dr. Brooks says. In high pressure towns like Lexington many students tend to be perfectionists.

People who strive for *excellence*

— they actually set realistic goals and they really enjoy the moment when they achieve those goals,” says Dr. Brooks. People confuse striving for excellence with perfectionism. There are some major differences. Often perfectionists set unrealistic goals and the sad thing is even if they reach those goals they do not obtain pleasure about reaching them. They worry, “I got an A but can I keep it up next time?” “Resilient people do not develop a catastrophic response to mistakes,” Brooks observes.

“When perfectionists make mistakes it’s like the end of the world. If mistakes occur and occur over and over gain they develop psychological protections to deal with failure. They are

very hard on themselves,

but then they may learn to blame others — blame their parents and blame teachers.”

The key to developing resilience is to shift the paradigm from focusing on deficits and failures to finding a child’s gifts and competencies and celebrating them. When they fail as all children will, it’s the response to the failure that establishes patterns of resilience. “We must allow them to fail, help them to deal with the failure and to move on. If a child feels as though mistakes are things that will occur they will develop positive coping strategies like studying more effectively.”

“Kids who are overwhelmed by the consequences of mistakes can start to numb themselves through drugs or anything to avoid some of those difficult feelings,” he says. And Brooks knows, he worked in drug rehab program and has counseled kids who used drugs and alcohol. “They use it just to numb their feelings and that’s not going to be very effective because it doesn’t help them to deal with the situations or help them to master it.”

Parents need to be the agents of change according to Dr. Brooks. It is ill-advised to wait for your child to take the first step

if they are experiencing problems. Brooks believes that adults must create the appropriate climate for children in both the home and at school to foster positive changes. What Brooks recommends is the opposite of “helicopter parenting.”

“It was sad for me years ago,” he says, “before we had the notion of helicopter parents in the lexicon, I used to say we should say a helicopter view — we should look at where our kids have been, where they are now, and where we want them to see the big picture from above like in a helicopter.” What Brooks envisions is not “hovering” over your child. “I’m saying — be more relaxed and see the big picture.” Often Brooks says, parents battle over insignificant issues and miss the broader view.



www.drrobertbrooks.com

“From birth parents are walking a tightrope. You have to be very careful not to jump in and to offer too much help and too much support because if you do your child is not going to learn to cope effectively with difficulties,” he explains. It actually undermines your child’s self-esteem. “The message is ‘we don’t think you can deal with things so we have to rush in,’” Brooks says.

Providing guidance during this walk along the tightrope is the key. According to Brooks you can’t help too much, but you can’t abandon either. You must help your children to learn how to cope.

“We have to assess the situation and ask ourselves are we helping our child develop good problem solving skills,” he says. “Are we helping them to see the consequences of their behavior?” Brooks advocates giving children choices and letting them make their own decisions as much as possible.

“To be resilient you have to be a good problem solver. Resilient people are thinking about different solutions or options all the time,” Brooks explains.

Brooks uses wonderful examples from his own experiences as a father to illustrate many of his points and points out the

times when he wasn’t the “charismatic adult” in his son’s life at times.

“I fell into the same trap when my son was underachieving in school,” he relates. “I fell into the trap of thinking it was somehow a reflection on me and I had a very narrow view of his achievements. I think that it was a blessing in disguise having a son who challenged me.”

Much of Brooks’ work focuses on the responsibility of adults to act as positive catalysts in the lives of children. Parents, teachers, administrators alike are all challenged to look for the assets in children rather than fixate on “deficits.”

In suburbs like Lexington it is difficult to escape the stress and pressure of achievement, but Brooks cautions parents to focus on the more important things. “I get more concerned when parents say to me ‘my child doesn’t have any friends and he never goes out.’ There are a lot of kids who are disconnected and they’re the ones who feel lonelier. Some of the kids seem really popular. Almost every town I go to where almost 100% of the kids go to college you’re going to get this.”

Dr. Brooks believes in the power of feeling valued as a child and adolescent. Offering kids the opportunity to participate at home, in the classroom and in the community reinforces their confidence and makes them feel that they have something to contribute.

Dr. Brooks says, “What I really want is to develop hope and resilience in our kids. All kids have strengths, and we know from our research that there’re certain characteristics and skills that go into making a resilient child.”

Dr. Brooks will be expanding on all of these themes and offering very specific advice to parents. The Lexington PTAs should be commended for bringing such an accomplished speaker to the community.

Dr. Robert Brooks is the author of a book titled *The Self-Esteem Teacher* and co-author with Dr. Sam Goldstein of the following books: *Raising Resilient Children*; *Nurturing Resilience in Our Children*; *Answers to the Most Important Parenting Questions*; *Seven Steps to Help Your Child Worry Less* (with Kristy Hagar); *Angry Children, Worried Parents: Seven Steps to Help Families Manage Anger* (with Sharon Weiss); *Seven Steps to Improve Your Child’s Social Skills* (with Kristy Hagar) and more. Dr. Brooks received his doctorate in clinical psychology from Clark University and did additional training at the University of Colorado Medical School. He is on the faculty of Harvard Medical School and has served as Director of the Department of Psychology at McLean Hospital, a private psychiatric hospital.