

THE  
ESSENTIAL  
**RESILIENCE &  
WELL-BEING**  
TOOLKIT  
FOR  
**EARLY YEARS**

.....

Key tools & strategies for  
professionals & parents



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# Contents

List of Worksheets	viii
About the Authors	xi
Introduction	xiii

## Part 1 Building Resilience

What Is Resilience & Why Is It Important in the Early Years?	3
Building Caring & Nurturing Relationships	5
The Effects of Anxiety	8
Understanding the Impact & Importance of Attachment Theory in Building Resilience	13
The Self-Esteem Myth	19
Thinking Skills	24
Emotional Literacy	26
Recognising, Naming & Managing Emotions	27
Using Emotion Coaching to Develop Self-Regulation & Resilience	32
Developing a Growth Mindset in Young Children	36
Building Confidence	38
Building Social Competence	40
Effective Thinking	44
Problem-Solving	47
Relax & Unwind	49
Encouraging Optimism	51
Planning for Transition & Change	54



## Part 2 Activities

The Activities: Overview .....	61
<b>1</b> Finding My Strengths .....	64
<b>2</b> Worry Warrior .....	68
<b>3</b> Relaxation Tools .....	71
<b>4</b> Visualisation .....	74
<b>5</b> Face Your Fears .....	75
<b>6</b> Anger Antics .....	79
<b>7</b> Thought Bubbles .....	82
<b>8</b> I Can't Do It ... Yet! .....	86
<b>9</b> A Good Mistake .....	88
<b>10</b> My Feelings .....	90
<b>11</b> My Day... ..	96
<b>12</b> The Problem-Solving Tree & Flower .....	100
<b>13</b> Goals Rocket & Overcoming Your Gremlins .....	104
<b>14</b> My Mountain... ..	108
<b>15</b> Mood Marbles .....	110
<b>16</b> Stop & Think about the Good Times! .....	112
<b>17</b> Magic Circles .....	114
<b>18</b> Oops! .....	117
<b>19</b> Magic Language .....	120
<b>20</b> What Lit the Fuse? .....	123
<b>21</b> My Good Deeds Ladder .....	125
<b>22</b> Mindful Moments .....	127
<b>23</b> What's in the Box? .....	129
<b>24</b> Using Grit .....	131
<b>25</b> Fantasy Island .....	133
<b>26</b> All about Me .....	135



27	Bottling Thoughts	137
28	Helping Hand	140
29	Problem-Solving	144
30	My Strengths & Skills	147

## Part 3 Handouts for Parents, Carers & Professionals

Introduction	157
1 Understanding Worries & Anxiety	158
2 Attachment	164
3 Emotional Literacy	172
4 Stress Busters & Relaxation	174
5 Building Authentic Self-Esteem...	181
6 Motivation Matters	183
7 Using Emotion Coaching	185
8 Managing Anger & Tantrums	187
9 Problem-Solving	192
10 Friendship...	193
11 Building Strengths & Skills	195
12 Offering Choices	196
13 Using Positive Language	197
14 Learning from Mistakes	198

## Part 4 Recommended Reading & Resources

Recommended Reading & Resources for Parents, Carers & Professionals	203
References	207

# List of Worksheets

<b>1</b>	Choices Cards (Activity 1).....	66
<b>2</b>	My Skills & Strengths (Activity 1) .....	67
<b>3</b>	Sample Fear Ladder (Activity 5).....	77
<b>4</b>	Facing My Fear (Activity 5) .....	78
<b>5</b>	Anger Picture Cards (Activity 6).....	81
<b>6</b>	Thought Bubbles (Activity 7) .....	83
<b>7</b>	Automatic Negative Thoughts (NATs) (Activity 7) .....	85
<b>8</b>	Feelings Faces (Activity 10) .....	92
<b>9</b>	Emotion Cards (Activity 10) .....	93
<b>10</b>	My Day (Activity 11) .....	98
<b>11</b>	The Ant & the Bee Flashcards (Activity 12) .....	103
<b>12</b>	My Goals Rocket (Activity 13) .....	106
<b>13</b>	My Gremlins (Activity 13).....	107
<b>14</b>	Mountain & Achievement Flashcards (Activity 14) .....	109
<b>15</b>	Mood Marbles Tracker (Activity 15) .....	111
<b>16</b>	Magic Circles (Activity 17) .....	116
<b>17</b>	Oops! (Activity 18) .....	119
<b>18</b>	Magic Language Script (Activity 19) .....	122
<b>19</b>	My Good Deeds Ladder (Activity 21) .....	126
<b>20</b>	Fantasy Island Cards (Activity 25) .....	134
<b>21</b>	Gingerbread Man (Activity 26) .....	136
<b>22</b>	Bottling Thoughts (Activity 27) .....	139
<b>23</b>	Helping Hand (Activity 28) .....	142

<b>24</b>	My Helping Hands (Activity 28) ... ..	143
<b>25</b>	Problem-Solving Framework (Activity 29) ... ..	146
<b>26</b>	Strengths Cards (Activity 30) ... ..	149
<b>27</b>	My Strengths (Activity 30) ... ..	151
<b>28</b>	Skills Cards (Activity 30) ... ..	152
<b>29</b>	My Skills & Things I'd Like to Do Better (Activity 30) ... ..	153

# Building Resilience

## What is Resilience & Why is it so Important in the Early Years?

[Resilience is]... a universal capacity that allows a person, group or community to prevent, minimise or overcome the damaging effects of adversity.

— Grotberg, 'The International Resilience Project', 1997, p.6

Resilience, grit, self-control and character are terms that have been increasingly used in the context of education, health and well-being. 'Resilience' describes the inter-related components that support an individual's positive self-development: the capacity of an individual to restore good mental and emotional health, following the onset of challenging and adverse situations.

The word 'resilience' is derived from the Latin *resilio*, literally meaning 'to jump (or bounce) back'. Emotional resilience measures our ability to cope with or adapt to stressful situations or crises, be this a hurricane in Kathmandu or an A-level exam in Kimbolton. In essence, the two situations are not so different: rather, they are on a spectrum of adversity. Disasters are the exception. They take you closer to your levels of tolerance. How we cope with adversity and how we cope with catastrophe are best perceived as on a continuum.

It is vital is for all those supporting young people, whether in a social or learning context, to understand that emotional resilience can be taught. It is not simply those who have been exposed to natural disasters who develop it; nor is it only children who can surround themselves with its protective armour. Researchers have also found that adults are just as adept at learning the skills needed to be emotionally strong, proactive and decisive, no matter how late in life they start to realise the importance of these skills.

Ultimately, resilience is the ability to steer through serious life challenges and find ways to bounce back and to thrive. We are all born with the capacity for resilience, but resilience is not something we have or do not have. We work on it throughout our lives and we need to start as early as possible. Parents are probably the most important people when it comes to building a child's resilience, as children learn a great deal by watching their parents. When parents cope well with everyday stress, they are showing their children how to do the same. This can also be said of teachers and support staff in the early years. They are also pivotal in fostering resilience and doing so by both modelling and intervention work.

- 11 Be true to yourself and your values.
- 12 Respect other people and treat them right.
- 13 Set goals and work to achieve them
- 14 Do not beat yourself up when you get it wrong.

## Thinking Skills

In building our resilience and that of our children, the development of 'thinking skills' is vital. This is because the way we react to things has a lot to do with the way we think about the situation. That is why thinking skills play a big part in our ability to regulate our emotions and behaviour. Here's an example:

Crystal, Katrina's 2-year-old daughter, has a tantrum in the shopping centre. Katrina thinks to herself, 'This is embarrassing. Everyone thinks I am a terrible mother. And it is all her father's fault for always giving in to her. He spoils her rotten.'

These thoughts make Katrina feel embarrassed about the situation and angry at her partner and child. She grits her teeth, grabs Crystal's hand and pulls her out of the shopping centre. Crystal wails even louder and everyone stares as they go by. Both Katrina and her daughter are terribly upset. Katrina's anger grows and she can't wait to have a real 'go' at her partner for spoiling Crystal.

We all jump to conclusions about *why* difficult situations happen in our lives. When we're looking at what *caused* the situation, we often blame someone. We blame ourselves or others for our problems.

Instead of jumping to conclusions, it is very useful to follow three easy steps in order to identify and understand what is really happening and why we are responding in the way that we do. These steps help us respond to stressful situations effectively, using our ability to think rationally as opposed to simply reacting or even over-reacting and catastrophising. In the example of Katrina, this process might look as follows:

Step 1	Stop and catch your thoughts: <i>'This is embarrassing. Everyone thinks I am a terrible mother. And it's all her father's fault for always giving in to her. He spoils her terribly.'</i>
Step 2	Take three deep breaths: <i>'Wait a minute, this isn't helpful. I need to take some deep breaths so I can be calm enough to calm her down.'</i>
Step 3	'Rethink' the situation by asking yourself: how else can I think about this? <i>'It's really hot and crowded in here. And it's almost nap time. Crystal is probably just trying to tell me this is too much for her. After all, she's only two.'</i>



## ABC

The CBT approach breaks a particular problem into three smaller parts:

- ❖ **A**, the **activating event**, is often referred to as the 'trigger' – the thing that causes you to engage in the negative thinking.
- ❖ **B** represents these negative **beliefs**, which can include thoughts, rules and demands, and the meanings the individual attaches to both external and internal events.
- ❖ **C**, the **consequences**, or emotions, and the behaviours and physical sensations accompanying these different emotions. It is important to highlight and discuss with children how the way that they think about a problem can affect how they feel physically and emotionally. It can also alter what they do about it. This is why the key aim for CBT is to break the negative, vicious cycle that some children and young people may find themselves in. For example, if you think that you will get your work wrong, you feel angry and then you do not give it a try in case it is wrong.

When working with children and young people in identifying such faulty thinking, the main aim is to encourage them to break the negative cycle.

### *Strategies to help children & young people engage in more effective thinking*

The following key strategies are helpful to break this negative cycle and can be adapted/differentiated for children and young people at each stage of development.

#### Test the evidence

One of the most helpful interventions for developing new and more positive belief systems and for challenging these 'negative automatic thoughts' (NATs) is to test the evidence. Children can engage in the following questioning process:

- 1 What is the evidence for this thought?
- 2 What is the evidence against this thought?
- 3 What would my best friend say if they heard my thought?
- 4 What would my teacher say if he heard my thought?
- 5 What would my parents or carers say if they heard my thought?
- 6 What would I say to my best friend if they had this same thought?
- 7 Am I making mistakes? For example, blowing it up, forgetting my strengths or good points, self-blaming, predicting failure, or thinking that I can mind read what others are thinking?

This kind of strategy is particularly useful in terms of reinforcing the need to gather accurate evidence. What we believe about ourselves is not always true. It is not how others always see us and these kinds of beliefs need to be challenged in this way. Using this sort of questioning process, and gathering evidence in the form of such a behavioural experiment, is a particularly positive strategy for beginning to identify and challenge unhelpful beliefs that children may hold.

## Reframing

Negative thoughts can be reframed into more positive, balanced and realistic ones through 'reframing'. For example, 'I am just fat', could be reframed as, 'I need to lose some weight and tone up a bit, but my overall shape isn't that bad.' Or, 'I always get the maths work wrong', could be reframed as, 'Some of these sums are difficult, but I know I can do the basics – I just need to work hard and find help in order to improve my skills.'

## Distraction

Children can be encouraged to control their thoughts by thinking of something else:

- ❖ They can describe in detail what they see around them in order to feel calmer. They can attempt to name all of their favourite bands.
- ❖ They can use self-talk techniques and repeat a positive coping message until the negative automatic thought has gone.
- ❖ They can 'bin' the thoughts by writing them down and then screwing them up and putting them into the bin – symbolically eradicating these negative thoughts.
- ❖ Students can also keep a positive diary in order to record 'positive automatic thoughts' (PATs) that may occur during the day and engage in realistic goal-setting, which involves practice.

Overall, what is important when children and young people are engaged in learning and developing these skills is for adults to encourage them to set appropriate targets. Young people need to be reminded that we do not move forwards unless we set realistic goals for ourselves. These should be broken down into small, achievable steps and the ultimate goal continually focused upon. Setting targets allows us to visualise where we want to be in the future: if we feel that we have nowhere to go, and nothing to move towards, then ultimately we will not be able to effect the change necessary.

# The Activities

The activities in this section have been written for flexible use with individual children, small groups and whole classes of young children. They can be used as stand-alone activities or as a block, as needed.

Details of how to use the activities with different groups are provided in the text of the activities, including suggested extensions to activities, if this seems appropriate.

## Overview of Activities

- 1 Finding My Strengths.** Making choices and identifying personal strengths; for use with individuals or small groups.
- 2 Worry Warrior.** Only for children who worry excessively; for individuals, or small groups.
- 3 Relaxation Tools.** For use with individuals, small groups, or in a whole class.
- 4 Visualisation.** For use with individuals, small groups, or in a whole class.
- 5 Face Your Fears.** Only for children suffering excessive fears and as a one-to-one activity.
- 6 Anger Antics.** Only for children experiencing excessive anger issues and as a one-to-one activity.
- 7 Thought Bubbles.** Children with reasonable language and attention skills and some self-awareness can engage in this activity; for use with individuals or small groups.
- 8 I Can't Do It ... Yet!** Focusing on the value of persistence and determination; for use with individuals, small groups, or whole classes.
- 9 A Good Mistake.** A story that provokes reflection and discussion on the value of 'failing' and making mistakes; for use with individuals, small groups, or whole classes.
- 10 My Feelings.** For children old enough to understand the concept and vocabulary of emotions; individuals, small groups, or whole classes.
- 11 My Day.** Children are encouraged to record and reflect on what has happened during their day; for use with individuals, small groups, or whole classes.

- 12 The Problem-Solving Tree & Flower.** Supporting the acquisition of problem-solving skills; for use with individuals, small groups, or whole classes.
- 13 Goals Rocket & Overcoming your Gremlins.** Focusing on personal determination, the acquisition of problem-solving skills and an understanding of how worry may hold us back. This is best used with individuals who are struggling with worries.
- 14 My Mountain.** Supporting determination and the acquisition of problem-solving skills; for use with individuals, small groups, or whole classes.
- 15 Mood Marbles.** Introduces a method of reflecting on and recording feelings; for use with individuals, small groups, or whole classes.
- 16 Stop & Think about the Good Times!** An activity focused on increasing our awareness of thought processes; for use with individuals, small groups, or whole classes.
- 17 Magic Circles.** This activity supports a change in focus to positive, rather than negative, events; for use with individuals, small groups, or whole classes.
- 18 Oops!** For children struggling to maintain a positive outlook. For use only with individuals, after they have completed Activity 17.
- 19 Magic Language.** This is an activity based on the adult facilitator's modelling of assertive and positive language; for use with individuals, small groups, or whole classes.
- 20 What Lit the Fuse?** For children struggling with excessive anger; individuals or very small groups.
- 21 My Good Deeds Ladder.** Each person creates a record of their 'good deeds'; for use in small groups, or as a whole class.
- 22 Mindful Moments.** Mindfulness practices for regular use with individuals or in a group.
- 23 What's in the Box?** This is a turn-taking game for two to four children, plus two adults.
- 24 Using Grit.** This includes some ideas for developing 'grit' and personal determination; for individuals or larger groups.
- 25 Fantasy Island.** A useful 'getting to know you' exercise, for individuals or larger groups.
- 26 All About Me.** A useful 'getting to know you' exercise, for individuals or larger groups.
- 27 Bottling Thoughts.** For children who have some understanding of how our thoughts affect us; best with individuals. There is an activity extension included for children who are excessively worried.



# Worksheet 1

## Choices Cards

<b>Music</b> 	<b>Talking</b> 
<b>Active</b> 	<b>Reading</b> 
<b>Quiet</b> 	<b>Listening</b> 
<b>Imagination</b> 	<b>Sports</b> 
<b>Drawing</b> 	<b>Helping</b> 
<b>Sorting</b> 	<b>Building</b> 
<b>Counting</b> 	<b>Running</b> 

# Worksheet 2

## My Skills & Strengths

Things I am good at ... 	How I could use this? 
◆ _____ _____	◆ _____ _____
◆ _____ _____	◆ _____ _____
◆ _____ _____	◆ _____ _____
◆ _____ _____	◆ _____ _____
◆ _____ _____	◆ _____ _____
◆ _____ _____	◆ _____ _____
◆ _____ _____	◆ _____ _____
◆ _____ _____	◆ _____ _____

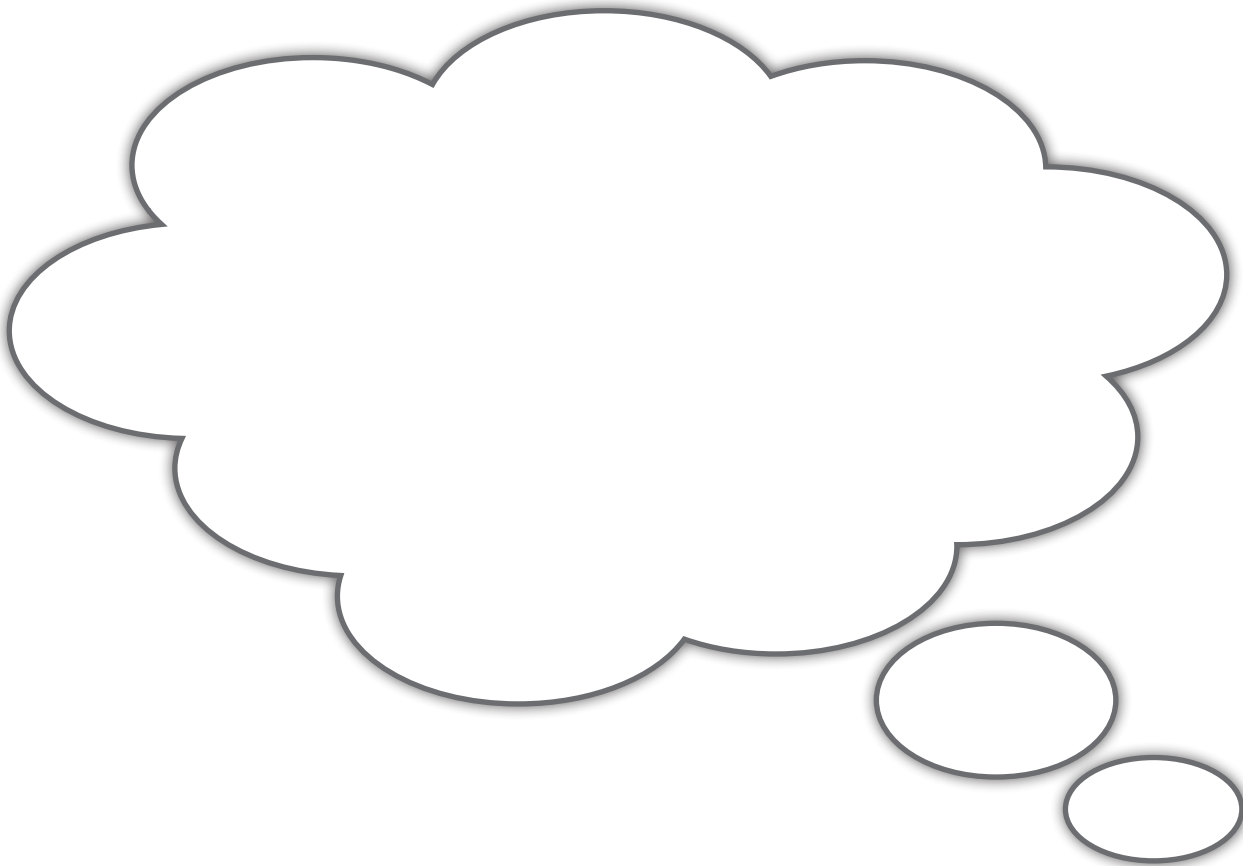
Think ahead!



Use your skills!

# Worksheet 6

## Thought Bubbles



Scenario 1



Page 1 of 2

# Worksheet 6

## Thought Bubbles

Scenario 2



Scenario 3





# Worksheet 9

## Emotion Cards



Confused



Lonely



Excited



Looked after



Cross



Bored



Happy



Sad



Safe



Relaxed



Loved



Angry

# Worksheet 26

## Strengths Cards

Courageous	Friendly	Responsible
Cautious	KIND	Supportive
<b>FORGIVING</b>	Honest	Warm
Talented	Hard-working	Courteous
Happy	Organised	<b>CHEERFUL</b>
Loving	Enthusiastic	<b>Colourful</b>
<b>COOPERATIVE</b>	<b>Sporting</b>	<b>SENSITIVE</b>

<i>Calm</i>	Helpful	Reliable
Relaxed	Patient	OPEN
<b>SENSIBLE</b>	<b>INDEPENDENT</b>	<b>Assertive</b>
LOYAL	Fair	Positive
Resilient	Capable	<i>Adaptable</i>
Skilful	<b>CREATIVE</b>	Humorous
<i>Powerful</i>	Resourceful	<b>Thoughtful</b>
Caring	<b>Efficient</b>	Determined
Protective	<i>Energetic</i>	Adventurous

# Handout 2

## Attachment

A resilient child will generally have, or have had, some experience of a consistent, positive parent or carer. They will generally be securely attached and will usually have an 'internal model' of their own being: worthwhile, safe and capable.

Positive parenting and positive role models (responsive, available, meeting the child's needs) can help to promote a person's ability to develop positive/secure attachment behaviour right through to early adulthood. However, we must remind ourselves that we cannot be positive and perfect all of the time and that is normal!

This handout is about understanding attachment behaviour and reflecting on some ways we might best support children who show insecure attachment behaviour.

### An overview of the psychology of attachment

John Bowlby came up with attachment theory, which included some of the following ideas:

- ❖ Attachments are a form of unique bond that all children make with significant adults.
- ❖ Attachment is about developing a style of attachment that is adaptive and useful to you in your local context.
- ❖ Children do not form only one attachment. There appear to be primary and secondary attachment figures.
- ❖ Although the first three years of life are thought to be a key time in attachment, attachment is a life-long process.
- ❖ There are many types of attachment and individual differences in how people respond to the behaviour they experience from caregivers.
- ❖ Through the 'attachment' the child learns an internal working model of: how people tend to behave; how emotions can be regulated; how likely it is that they will be given responsive attention; how much they are on their own, or 'in it with others'.

## Golden rules of attachment

Securely attached children tend to be:

- ❖ better learners
- ❖ more able to form new attachments
- ❖ able to ask for help easily
- ❖ willing to share adults' attention

Insecurely attached children:

- ❖ often feel lost and unnoticed
- ❖ may set out to reinforce their internal model (e.g., naughty, shy)
- ❖ may provoke hostile reactions in teachers, which reinforce their feelings of insecurity

What do insecurely attached children need?

- ❖ reliable adults who have time to respond
- ❖ predictable interactions and routines (or changes explained clearly)
- ❖ adults who respond to their needs (at the appropriate developmental level)
- ❖ clear boundaries
- ❖ specific attachment figures
- ❖ people prepared to challenge their negative internal models through sensitive interaction

There are many children and young people that demonstrate 'insecure' attachment behaviour. 'Avoidant' or 'ambivalent' behaviours are included in this category of insecure attachment behaviours.

Please note we are not labelling a child as 'secure', 'insecure', 'avoidant', or 'ambivalent', just their behaviour or 'behavioural style'. There is also evidence that the plasticity of the brain means that our 'styles' or 'internal working models' can change.