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## **Executive Functioning and Resiliency**

**By Joan T. Kloth-Zanard**

How children's brains work and why sometimes things just seem out of sorts and jumbled or just plain hard to do.

There are professionals out there who will claim children are resilient. Resilience is the ability to regain or recoup quickly from a difficult situation. New research shows this is not true for all children. In other words, not all children are resilient. In fact, children are only resilient if...they get the right resources and support, otherwise they lack executive functioning skills such as the ability to critically think. "Executive function encompasses the critical thinking skills of planning, organizing, prioritization, time management, working memory, attention, and other skills." <https://www.theotttoolbox.com/critical-thinking/> The following criteria have been established through research as necessary for a child to have resiliency. (Hartford University, 2015). And these are exactly what the alienating parent does not want for their children.

1. Facilitating supportive adult-child relationships;
2. Building a sense of self-efficacy and perceived control;
3. Providing opportunities to strengthen adaptive skills and self-regulatory capacities; and
4. Mobilizing sources of faith, hope, and cultural traditions.

This all plays into a child's brain development. Science and research show that the human brain does not stop growing until age 25 or maturing until age 35. It is why the Federal and State governments do not allow children to vote until age 18, smoke or drink until 21 or rent a car until 25. Part of this mental emotional growth process is as follows:

1. The Concrete brain – the brain that sees things as it is such as a horse is a horse because it has 4 legs, runs fast, and says neigh.
2. The abstract Brain – the brain that asks why, what, where and when.
3. The Pre-teen Brain – the brain that is putting all of this into practice but has not had their hormones kick in to refute things and allows a child to think outside the box.
4. The Hormonal Brain – the brain that gets overloaded with hormones that can misdirect a child or hypermotivated them in the wrong direction.
5. The Frontal lobe v. the Hypothalamus and Pituitary Glands or The Intellectual brain v. the hormonal brain or the Frontal v. amygdala and hippocampus. The brain on and off of steroids.
6. The Executive Functioning and Critical Thinking brain – the brain that is trying to apply what it has learned in life. Children take the skills they are learning at home and apply them to the real world. If these are corrupted, they have no basis for application.

This last one is more important than most people realize. It can become corrupted and delayed because of parental alienation. There are eleven skills that children should attain by adulthood so they can function and handle stressful situations, difficult people and their jobs.

Response Inhibition – also known as self-control to refrain or avoid things that are in conflict with what you know to be true or in opposition to something we know to be wrong. Can the child block out the negative comments coming from a parent about the other parent? Can the child control how they feel without letting someone else's beliefs and feelings become their new memories and beliefs?

1. Working Memory

Working memory is a child's ability to retain facts for longer than just that moment in time. It needs to be able to recall positive facts about a parent and not the fictions that the other parent is trying to replace them with. Alienated children are bombarded with false memories and this impedes their working memory of the true facts.

2. Emotional Control

Emotional Control involves understanding the borders and boundaries of the child's emotions and feelings in a health positive way by giving appropriate emotional responses to events and maintaining self-control, no matter what the present mental state. It involves controlling defensiveness, or loss of concentration due to unresolved issues, and not feeling like emotions are all over the place. Alienated children have so many conflicting emotions, that they literally split emotionally, mentally and more.

3. Sustained Attention

As the name suggests, is the ability to stay on task and not get lost, being able to persist with the task at hand. In an alienated child this might look like procrastination to do school work or do chores or losing focus in a conversation especially when at the alienated parent's home where they have been told they do not need to do this.

4. Task Initiation

Just getting started can be difficult. From procrastination to putting it off to last minute, this lack of inaction results from executive function lags. Alienated children are often told they do not have to be ready for their other parent or be available to do their chores etc. Making task initiation confusing from one house to the other and then in the real world.

5. Planning and Prioritizing

Being able to put a plan into place with timely goals is important to help us remain organized and on task. Children of alienation maybe able to do this with work but when it comes to home and relationships, it may not come as easily. Alienated children are told they do not have to provide information to the other parent, no less in a timely organized fashion.

6. Organization

Creating order, structure, tidiness that not only helps the child know what is coming up but whether anyone else can follow the direction. Alienated children may be able to do this with school or work but not at home where the trauma is. Alienated children are often taught that they do not have to be clean, tidy or organized at the other parent's home thus interfering with organizational development tasks.

7. Time Management

Managing how your days, hours, and being able to predict with some certainty how long something will take, such as getting to appointments on time, have an importance to showing how responsible someone is. Alienated children are often taught that they do not have to be on time for anything with the other parent, thus muddling the value of this executive function skill in the real world.

8. Goal Directed Persistence

Working toward the completion of a goal or task allows the person to recognize successes, make choices despite distractions. Alienated children are taught that they need not do any work or show any positive movement when with the other parent, especially when it comes to their relationship. They will often be allowed to change the goal post or direction of things just to fit the alienator's needs.

9. Flexibility

Being flexible enables a person to grow and change with little time to adjust. Alienated children are taught that they do not have to adjust or follow the other parent's lead especially if it is last minute. Instead, they are taught to make a stink about it and this interferes with this skill ability at work and with others. They are actually taught to interfere with the other parents plans.

10. Metacognition

There is more to things when we put them all together. It is called the 'bigger picture' and includes self-introspect. Alienated children see the world through the alienator's black and white lens. This can be confusing as it negates the child's ability to recognize their own thoughts and feelings from others and how to actually see the whole picture, and not just what the alienator wants them to see. Alienated children fail at seeing the whole situation because of false memories implanted by the alienator to skew the 'bigger picture'.

As Amanda Sillars, an alienated child put it in a recent email to me...

"The first thing that came to mind was the dynamic of the alienating parent making out that everything is wonderful and that life is amazing for the child when in fact, it isn't. Pretending nothing is wrong; they are manipulated to be over-positive, impacting the child. Where you would typically have insight into how you feel and think, these are both repressed, and the child soldiers on like everything is fine. The child becomes over-positive rather than resilient. The child learns to neglect their thoughts and feelings and has no insight into how abnormal their thinking is and their boundaries are being compromised, which becomes normal. It carries into physical illnesses and injuries too. I experienced this on a large scale, but people always said I was resilient instead.

A lovely lady I know that manages this website wrote a great little article:  
<https://hopefulpanda.com/toxic-positivity/>

Then the topic of higher empathy came to mind and the addiction to appeasing the parent with the high emotional bar. Like when they are emotionally rewarded, they get a dopamine hit. It is addictive. Sadly, it plays out in other toxic relationships from learning and the reward system. You feel like you have higher resilience for emotional pain but are hooked on the rewards.” (12-13-2022)

Without these executive functioning skills, children lose their resiliency. They are dependent on one parent’s unhealthy and warped view of their relationship with the other parent. One of the best ways to ensure that a child has these skills is through Shared Parenting. With Shared Parenting, the children get to see things from their own perspective and not that of one parent. As such, each of these executive functioning skills relies upon a child’s healthy, happy relationship with both parents as role models.

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