

IDEAS

For struggling families, classes in resilience can be lifelines

Inside a program that helps parents handle precarity while keeping their kids from growing up too fast.

By Maggie Jackson Updated November 5, 2023, 3:00 a.m.



Hobbs, N.M., an oil town near the Texas border, was one of the early sites for Ready4Routines, an eight-week course aimed at helping families build time for reflection into their lives. JKGABBERT/ADOBE/JKGABBERT - STOCK.ADOBE.COM

One Sunday morning, Shaniece Langley heard the screen door open and was on instant alert. Her 3-year-old son, Robert, had been slipping outside nearly every day. Their ranch house was just off a highway in Hobbs, N.M., an oil town. Her husband, a pipe fitter, was on call, his comings and goings unpredictable. Langley shouted to her kids, heard back from her 4-year-old daughter, and took off. She found her son clutching his football at the end of the driveway. “I freaked out,” she recalls. “‘Robert,’ I said, ‘you can’t do that. Momma didn’t know what was going to happen.’”

As Langley ends her story, there are murmurs of consolation from a dozen other women seated around a table set up in a preschool gym. They are midway through a pioneering parenting course being beta-tested for families of Head Start, the iconic free preschool program. Many are single mothers. A majority live at or near the poverty line in a town at the epicenter of a precarious industry. The mothers here are deeply familiar with what it is like to spend their lives, as Langley puts it, “figuring out how we’re going to do it from one day to the next” while wanting something far more.

In this weekly class, parents often meet from morning into the afternoon, singing what Langston Hughes called the “weary blues.” They swap tales of young men dying violently, days too hectic to give a child a hug, and tinges of fear when a strange car lingers on the street. Mornings for Langley typically have meant waking up late, rushing her children along, forgotten homework, lost tempers. By evening, she often would count the minutes until her kids’ bedtime.

And yet there is grace in this room. The women are lauded for what they do well even as they are offered a way to move beyond lives of hurry and near misses. They are learning to augment their own remarkable survival skills with the moments of reflection that can help them get ahead of life’s precarity and even tame it too. In a few years, iterations of the class will be rolled out to tens of thousands of families across the country. But the teachings here hold lessons for us all.

Today, volatility is rising in work hours, geopolitics, the climate, and other realms. How can we flourish in an era of flux and teach our children to do so? In Hobbs, I am witnessing a new resilience marked by wary vigilance, dynamic learning, and insightful deliberation. The class moves on, the stories flow, and the preschool staff and the mothers of Hobbs together explore a timely revelation: “When things don’t go as planned,” one teacher says, “you get a chance to learn something new.”

Survival strategies

For decades, scientists have tried to uncover how poverty affects the young. Do lower-income parents speak less to their children, for example, and does this matter? Determining how early challenges shape cognitive outcomes is a complex puzzle. But as scientists began to focus on systemic factors, not just family structure or neglect, a missing link emerged: unpredictability. Lower-income families tend to move more, largely involuntarily. Shifting work hours disrupt home routines. Precarity turns out to be a crucial, overlooked influence on the young.

Kids with unpredictable caregivers at age 1 later tend to rush into things and get frustrated by failure. More often than children raised with order, 5-year-olds whose households were unstable when they were 2 cannot resist peeking at a gift being wrapped for them despite being told not to look. Precarious lives can inhibit language development or focus. Often, it seems to tip the young toward reactivity. And in an unreliable world, this can be wise. When the future is not assured, impulsivity can be a form of agility. “For a child accustomed to stolen possessions and broken promises, the only guaranteed treats are the ones you already have swallowed,” observes researcher Celeste Kidd.

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Complicating the association between poverty and cognitive deficits, new research is revealing “hidden talents” that emerge in times of flux. Youths raised in upheaval, for example, often detect subtle changes in threatening situations. In one study, Black teen boys in Chicago who were most hyper-alert over the course of a year witnessed the least violence. Such “survival strategies” should be respected, not undermined, asserts lead researcher Noni Gaylord-Harden.

In volatile times, children’s brains do exactly what’s needed to optimize their survival. Their cognitive circuitry becomes specialized for picking up on what matters most: fleeting opportunities, clues to what’s coming, and, above all, signs of danger. This process exemplifies the audacity of human adaptation.

Still, there are costs to this way of life. Chronic unpredictability is linked to cognitively growing up too fast, research suggests. In honing a narrow set of survival skills, young brains may lose some of the neuroplasticity that allows for worlds of thinking beyond reactivity.

How can we offer children raised in precarity chances to develop both street-smart agility and the capacity to discern and explore?

Teaching kids to reflect, not only react

One spring day, I meet Philip David Zelazo at a crowded Middle Eastern cafe near his home in St. Paul, Minn. A renowned University of Minnesota developmental psychologist, Zelazo has spent his career studying how children can surpass the confines of constant reactivity, as helpful as that stance can be. As the lunch hour comes and goes, he patiently distills years of unheralded research that led to his pioneering efforts in Hobbs and elsewhere to help children of chaos recover the wonder and plasticity that should be the special terrain of the young.

As a graduate student, Zelazo invented the Dimensional Change Card Sort, a widely used cognitive assessment for children that tracks a trio of attention skills — working memory, cognitive flexibility, and inhibition — called executive function. But even as he became a globe-trotting expert on executive function, Zelazo sensed there was more to the question of how kids succeed than how well they pay attention. What he discovered was a critical complement to survival mode: reflection.

Think of a ship’s captain. To navigate, she might use satellite navigation or a star chart, guidance tools akin to executive function skills. But the captain also must understand each unexpected or ambiguous problem, such as a sudden squall. By considering and reconsidering a problem, she can see multiple sides to a question and the relations between different threads of knowledge. (How does the storm’s speed and path intersect with the ship’s seaworthiness?) Reflection allows thinkers to, Zelazo says, “stand on top of the decision tree.”

Using the sorting test, Zelazo has taught preschoolers from challenged backgrounds to reflect more readily, with impressive results. To play, children are asked to sort picture cards either by color or by shape. (In a color round, yellow cards go together, regardless of whether they are daisies or stars.) If they err, an experimenter spells out what's wrong, asks the child to name the current round being played, offers an example, and asks them to try again. Children taught to reflect this way show gains in executive function, theory of mind, and neural markers of efficiency. They can recognize that a red rabbit is both a colored object and a kind of animal and that their thinking at any one moment is just an idea, something to build on and fine tune.

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Could reflection safeguard children from cognitively growing up too fast? I ask Zelazo. While much is not known about neuroplasticity and accelerated brain development in children, Zelazo is cautiously optimistic. "Being in an exploratory mode, being curious, finding it easier to play the new game — that's plasticity," he says. "Reflection is an opening up to possibilities."

With funding from Harvard University's Center for the Developing Child, Zelazo in 2013 began working with Acelero Learning, a respected firm that manages Head Start programs, to create a course to teach reflection to families in precarity. Years in the making, the course was beta-tested at 11 sites around the country, including New Mexico. This is what I came to Hobbs to see.

Called Ready4Routines, the eight-week course ostensibly helps families build the daily routines often eroded by poverty. But while the routines are important, they are mostly entry points to learning how to, as the curriculum explains, "think about what you are doing." During the class, parents are taught a set of skills — pausing, engaging, encouraging their children, and, most important, reflecting — to call on as they and their children clean up toys or set the table. In this way, simple acts of survival — and by extension the times when things inevitably go wrong — can become something to investigate, ponder, and improve.

'Moments of spaciousness and connection'

The room quiets as preschool director Patricia Grovevy gets down to business.

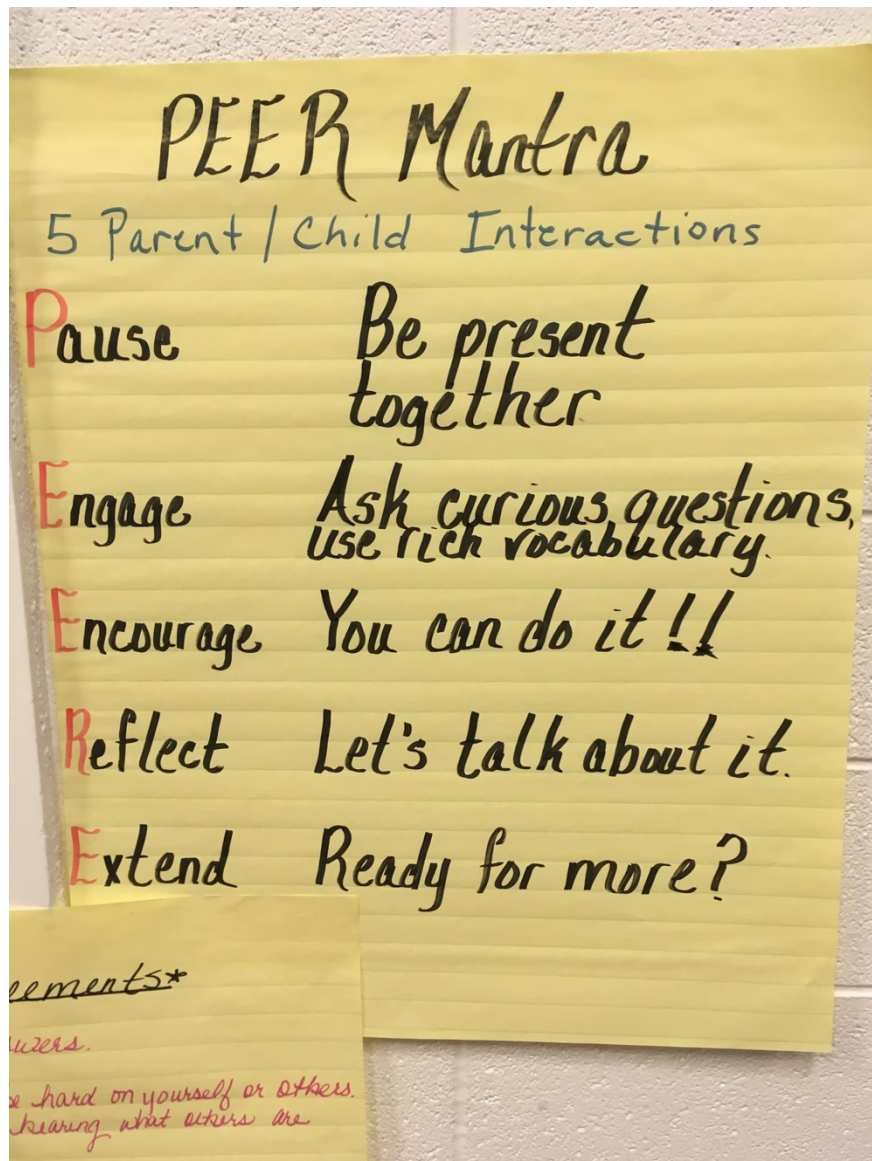
"Let me stop and think — that's reflection," says Grovevy. "What's working? What isn't working?" She is underscoring the message of the course: "In any moment, you have choices."

After the mothers discuss how they are putting the lessons into practice, the conversation turns to the course's other main aim. Grovevy reminds the women, and they in turn urge one another, to take time to confront life's precarity with their children. By scaffolding their thinking via reflection, the mothers of Hobbs are teaching their children to do so as well.

One young mother, Starr Gibson, speaks up, describing how her four children had rejected her two younger siblings when they had to move in. "It was like, 'Take them home. I don't want them here,'" says Gibson. "One said, 'This is my bedroom and my bedroom only.'"

"Listen, I got bunk beds for a reason," she patiently explained. She set aside survival mode to walk them through another point of view. (Says Zelazo, "Seeing the world one way or another or coming up with a third way — that is the kernel and the insight.") "It's *y'all's* room now."

"It's getting there, Starr," says Grove. "You're making them think, you're making them think."



This list of strategies for using with children was posted in a Ready4Routines class in Hobbs, N.M. MAGGIE JACKSON

Results from the first Ready4Routine classes were mixed. Two pilot studies showed boosts in children's executive function scores, but the gains did not pan out in a pair of full studies. Still, the program was a resounding success by many measures. More than 90 percent of participants felt closer to their children, and equal numbers said they got along better as families.

By 2023, Acelero Learning had embedded elements of the course into family engagement and other programs at the Head Start schools that it operates as well as into its technical assistance work with state and community partners, while continuing to develop the materials on its own. The initiatives were reaching upwards of 100,000 children and families in multiple states. "There's something promising about this," Acelero's senior vice president of family engagement, Lori Levine, told me. "It creates moments of spaciousness and connection in the lives of families."

Learning to draw close but not too close to raw precarity: This is the gift that the mothers of Hobbs ultimately learned to offer their children. Later results showed that parents who took the classes became more "autonomy supportive," meaning they let their children experience challenges on their own while stepping in to help if a task becomes overwhelming. In countries as varied as China and Ghana, children with autonomy-supportive caregivers tend to be motivated learners who experience higher well-being.

The new resilience is a kind of ambidexterity, a capacity to toggle between gauging what's confronting you right now and discovering hidden sides to a question. As our world grows more volatile, we cannot afford to overlook the critical skills inherent in survival mode or the lessons to be learned from those who do it painfully well. And yet by ascending to a panoramic view in thought, we gain the spaciousness needed to look ahead. We can adopt stances of exploration, curiosity, and wonder that elevate us from merely fending off threat after threat.

Early in the pandemic, Shaniece Langley's life was turned upside down. Pregnant with her third child, she was ordered by her doctor to go on bed rest, and her job selling cable subscriptions door to door dried up. Her husband was let go from his job, they separated, and days after giving birth to a baby girl, she was forced out of her house. She was jobless for a year before finding her footing again.

All the while, she held onto snatches of reflection like lifelines. The course taught her to "take more time with things, to actually make it more meaningful while you're doing it," she tells me. Such moments keep her going and are, she believes, the building blocks of her children's futures. "If you don't teach your children how to handle life and what gets in your way," says Langley, "they will never think about the things they are doing and the things they are going to do."

This essay is adapted from Maggie Jackson's new book, ["Uncertain: The Wisdom and Wonder of Being Unsure,"](#) to be published Tuesday by Prometheus Books.