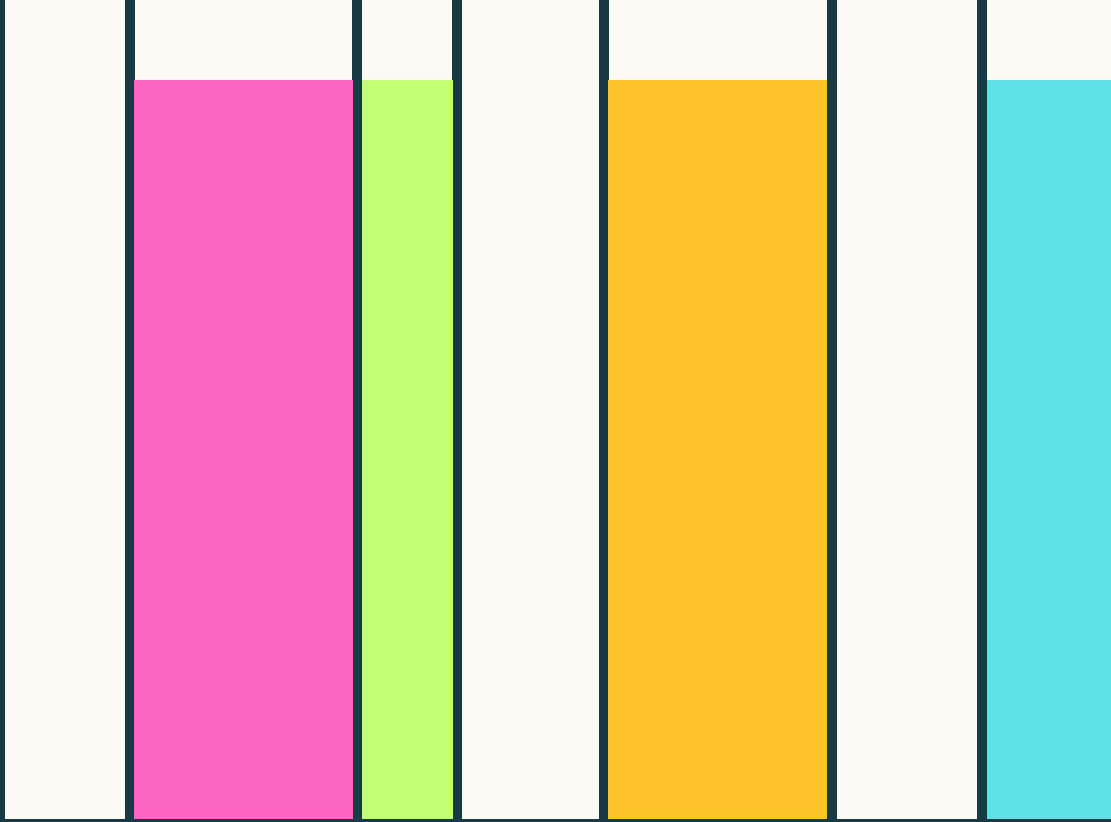


Small Steps, Strong Minds: Encouraging Sisu in the Early Years



WHAT IS SISU?

Sisu is a Finnish concept of resilience that refers to the inner strength to continue despite extreme difficulty. It goes beyond persistence, describing a psychological capacity to push beyond perceived limits with calm determination. Unlike resilience, which often focuses on recovery, sisu emphasises the ability to persist even when there is little hope of success (Hart, 2025; Rajalingam, 2025).

Research suggests that resilience is not solely an individual trait but is shaped by supportive environments and relationships. Coordinated and collaborative approaches to care have been shown to improve wellbeing outcomes, indicating that concepts such as sisu can be developed through social support rather than existing purely as an internal quality (Foley et al., 2023).

THE SCIENCE OF SISU

Sisu can be understood as a psychological response to stress, enabling individuals to continue functioning despite adversity. High levels of stress increase cortisol, which can negatively impact focus, sleep and overall wellbeing. Developing resilience through sisu helps individuals regulate these responses and build greater capacity to cope with challenges.

Importantly, *sisu* does not promote burnout or excessive effort. Instead, it emphasises balance, encouraging individuals to persist with calm determination while also valuing rest and recovery. This highlights that resilience is not simply about endurance, but about sustaining wellbeing through controlled and purposeful action (Hart, 2025).

CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF SISU

Although sisu is often viewed as a positive form of resilience, research by Pentti Henttonen et al. (2022) suggests it is a more complex construct. Their study identified both beneficial and harmful forms of sisu, showing that while beneficial sisu is linked to higher wellbeing and lower depression, harmful sisu is associated with increased stress and poorer mental health. This challenges the assumption that persistence is always positive, highlighting that excessive determination can become counterproductive.

However, the study also raises questions about whether sisu is truly distinct, as beneficial sisu overlaps with existing constructs such as resilience and mental toughness. Additionally, the research relies largely on specific sample groups and cross-sectional data, limiting generalisability and preventing clear causal conclusions. Overall, this suggests that sisu should be understood as a **balanced concept**, where persistence must be combined with self-awareness to support wellbeing.

APPLICATION OF SISU

Resilience theory emphasises a shift from focusing on deficits to recognising individual strengths and capacities for growth. Rather than concentrating solely on problems, this approach highlights the importance of building on existing coping strategies and support systems. In practice, resilience can be developed through identifying personal strengths, fostering self-efficacy, and strengthening relationships that support adaptation to adversity (Zimmerman et al., 2013).

This perspective supports the application of sisu, suggesting that inner strength is not solely an innate trait but can be nurtured through both personal effort and external support. Developing skills such as emotional regulation, problem-solving and cognitive flexibility may enhance an individual's ability to persist through challenges in a balanced and sustainable way (Social Work Test Prep, 2023).

