

Fostering Resiliency in Kids

Bonnie Benard

Despite overwhelming adversity, many children successfully manage to bounce back. What personal characteristics make this possible, and how can schools create environments that support these children?

Much attention has been focused recently on “at risk” children, especially those who face poverty, neglect, abuse, physical handicaps, war, or the mental illnesses, alcoholism, or criminality of their parents. Amazingly, while researchers have found that these children do develop more problems than the general population, they have also learned that a great percentage of the children become healthy, competent young adults.

For example, Michael Rutter’s research on children growing up in adverse conditions found that half of the children did not repeat that pattern in their own adult lives (1985). Emmy Werner’s ongoing, 38-year study of the children of Kauai found that one-third of the children having four or more risk factors during their childhood were doing fine by adolescence. By age 32, two-thirds of the children who did develop problems during adolescence were leading successful adult lives (Werner and Smith 1992).

The repeated documentation of this “resiliency”—the ability to bounce back successfully despite exposure to severe risks—has clearly established the self-righting nature of human development. Furthermore, several longitudinal studies of children growing up in adversity have identified protective factors in the child, family, school, and community that can buffer life’s stresses.

While as educators we need to understand the stresses that are part of

children’s lives, we must move beyond a focus on the “risk factors” and problems in order to create the conditions that will facilitate children’s healthy development. A growing body of research tells us what young people need to overcome the risks they face (Benard 1991).

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Profile of the Resilient Child

According to the literature, the resilient child is one who “works well, plays well, loves well, and expects well.” Resilient children usually have four attributes: social competence, problem-solving skills, autonomy, and a sense of purpose and future.

Social competence includes qualities such as responsiveness—especially the ability to elicit positive responses from others—flexibility, empathy, caring, communication

skills, and a sense of humor. From early childhood on, resilient children tend to establish positive relationships with both adults and peers that help bond them to their family, school, and community.

Problem-solving skills encompass the abilities to think abstractly and reflectively and to be able to attempt alternate solutions for both cognitive and social problems. Two skills are especially important: planning, which facilitates seeing oneself in control; and resourcefulness in seeking help from others. The literature on children growing up in slums provides an extreme example of the role these skills play in the development of resiliency; these children must continually negotiate the demands of their environment or die (Felsman 1989).

Autonomy is having a sense of one’s own identity and an ability to act independently and exert some control over one’s environment. Several researchers have also identified the ability to separate oneself from a dysfunctional family environment—to detach enough from parental distress to maintain outside pursuits and satisfactions—as the major characteristic of resilient children growing up in families with alcoholism and mental illness (Berlin and Davis 1989).

A sense of purpose entails having goals, educational aspirations, persistence, hopefulness, and a sense of a bright future. Werner and Smith conclude that:

The central component of effective coping with the multiplicity of inevitable life stresses appears to be a sense of coherence, a feeling of confidence that one’s internal and external environment is predictable and that things will probably work out as well as can be reasonably expected (1989).



Nancy Leghart

When looking at this profile of a resilient child, we must look beyond personality traits and the ever-present temptation to “blame the victim” or “fix the kid” and examine the environmental characteristics that have fostered the development of resiliency. Families, schools, and communities that have protected children growing up in adversity are characterized by (1) caring and support, (2) positive expectations, and (3) ongoing opportunities for participation.

A Caring Environment

Given the incredible stresses the family system is now experiencing, school has become a vital refuge for a growing number of children, serving as a “protective shield to help children withstand the multiple vicissitudes that they can expect of a stressful world” (Garmezy 1991). James Garbarino, who researched resiliency

in children living in war conditions, including inner-cities in the United States, tells us:

Despite the overwhelming pressures in the environment, 75 to 80 percent of the children can use school activities as a support for healthy adjustment and achievement when schools are sensitive to them and their burdens (Garbarino et al. 1992).

The level of caring and support within a school gives us a powerful indicator of positive outcomes for youth. While Werner in her research acknowledges that “only a few studies have explored the role of teachers as protective buffers in the lives of children who overcome great adversity,” she found that

among the most frequently encountered positive role model in the lives of the children of Kauai, outside of the family circle, was a favorite teacher. For the resilient youngster a special teacher

was not just an instructor for academic skills, but also a confidant and positive model for personal identification (1990).

Further documenting the power of a caring teacher is Sarah Moskowitz’s 30-to-40-year follow-up study of childhood survivors of the Nazi Holocaust. Following World War II, children from concentration camps and orphanages were sent to a therapeutic nursery school in England. All 24 of the resilient survivors “considered *one* woman to be among the most potent influences in their lives—the nursery school teacher who provided warmth and caring, and taught them to behave compassionately” (1983).

Reinforcing these findings, Nel Noddings’s research into the power of caring relationships at school found that

at a time when the traditional structures of caring have deteriorated, schools must become places where teachers and students live together, talk with each other, take delight in each other’s company (1988).

The need for caring teachers was also a major concern of high school students. According to a study done by Stanford University’s Center for Research on the Context of Secondary School Teaching,

the number of student references to wanting caring teachers is so great that we believe it speaks to the quiet desperation and loneliness of many adolescents in today’s society (Phelan et al. 1992).

An independent study by the Institute for Education in Transformation at Claremont Graduate School found similar concerns (1992).

While we cannot overemphasize the importance of the teacher as caregiver,

we must not overlook the role of caring peers and friends in the school and community environments. Research into the resiliency of "street gamins" clearly identifies peer support as critical to the survival of these young people (Felsman 1989). Similarly, Werner found caring friends to be a major factor in the development of resiliency in the disadvantaged population in Kauai (Werner and Smith 1989).

Resilient youth take the opportunity to fulfill the basic human need for social support, caring, and love. If this opportunity is unavailable to them in their immediate family environment, it is imperative that the school give them the chance to develop caring relationships.

Positive Expectations

Research has shown that schools that establish high expectations for all kids—and give them the support necessary to live up to the expectations—have incredibly high rates of academic success. Rutter found that schools within poverty-stricken areas of London showed considerable differences in rates of delinquency, behavioral disturbance, attendance, and academic attainment (even after controlling for family risk factors). The successful schools shared certain characteristics: an academic emphasis, teachers' clear expectations and regulations, a high level of student participation, and alternative resources such as library facilities, vocational work opportunities, art, music, and extracurricular activities (Rutter et al. 1979). In her research, Judith Brook found that high expectations and a school-wide ethos that values student participation also mitigated the most powerful risk factor for adolescent alcohol and drug use—peers who use drugs (Brook et al. 1989).

Researcher Rhona Weinstein identifies the following ways through which we can communicate positive, high expectations to students (1991):

The Child Development Project

The Child Development Project (CDP) is a comprehensive program aimed at fostering children's ethical, social, and intellectual development. At its philosophical core is the idea that values must be *experienced* as well as taught.

Mobility and demographic changes have robbed many children of close, trusting relationships. Because these are critical to development, CDP schools seek to become "caring communities," where children feel valued, connected, and responsible to others. Project teachers shape many facets of elementary school life:

The *curriculum* gives children opportunities to work collaboratively and to explore—through literature, history, science—what it means to be a principled, caring human being.

Discipline emphasizes problem solving, not punishment.

Motivational practices focus children's attention on the joys inherent in ethical conduct and in learning—not on external rewards or punishments.

Schoolwide culture enables all children—not just the best-behaved or highest-achieving—to be contributing members of the school community.

Family activities make the school a welcoming place that helps children deepen their bonds with family members.

In CDP schools, teachers spend up to 30 days over three years in staff development that explores how discipline practices, cooperative learning, literature-based reading, schoolwide events, and parent outreach can foster

children's ethical and intellectual development. At weekly partner study meetings, teachers share successes and problems in their pursuit of these common goals.

Ultimately, though, each CDP school finds its own way to make close, trusting relationships central to school life. Schools invent new traditions and reshape existing ones as they reweave the fabric of school life to emphasize values of kindness, fairness, and personal responsibility.

Research on attachment and intrinsic motivation provides strong evidence that trusting, mutually satisfying relationships are critical to character development. Evidence links character development to the sense of community within a school.

Originally developed in collaboration with the San Ramon and Hayward school districts in California, CDP has been the focus of an intensive longitudinal study over the past 12 years. Recently, the project has expanded to districts in Cupertino, San Francisco, and Salinas, Calif.; Dade County, Fla.; Jefferson County, Ky.; and White Plains, N.Y. In these districts, a group of 24 program and comparison schools will be studied extensively over four years.

For more information, contact the Developmental Studies Center, 2000 Embarcadero, Suite 305, Oakland, CA 94606-5300. ■

—Eric Schaps, Catherine C. Lewis, and Marilyn Watson

Teacher behavior and attitudes.

Teachers who convey the message that "this work is important; I know you can do it; I won't give up on you" and who play to the strengths of each child exert a powerful motivating influence, especially on students who receive the opposite message from their families and communities. In *Among School Children*, Tracy Kidder says:

For children who are used to thinking of themselves as stupid or not worth talking to or deserving rape and beatings, a good teacher can provide an

astounding revelation. A good teacher can give a child at least a chance to feel, "She thinks I'm worth something; maybe I am" (1990).

Jeff Howard's work through the Efficacy Institute found that children in inner-city Detroit schools achieved more when they were directly taught that intellectual development is something they all can achieve through effort, as compared to something only some people are born with (1990).

Curriculum. A rich and varied curriculum provides opportunities for

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students to be successful not just in academics but also in the arts, in sports, in community service, in work apprenticeship, and in helping peers. In doing so, it communicates the message that the unique strengths of each individual are valued. Schools that integrate academic and vocational education for all their students convey the message that both skills are vital to future success. A multicultural curriculum tells children of color that their cultural roots and languages are valued.

Evaluation. Schools that encourage young people do not rely on standardized tests that assess only one or two types of intelligences (usually linguistic and logical-mathematical). Instead, they use multiple approaches, especially authentic assessments, that promote self-reflection and validate the different types of intelligences, strengths, and learning styles children possess.

Motivation and responsibility for learning. Schools that are especially successful in promoting resiliency build on students' intrinsic motivation and interests through a varied and rich curriculum that encourages cooperation instead of competition. Furthermore, active student participation and decision making in both the curriculum and evaluation foster students' responsibility and ownership for learning.

Grouping. How we group children in our classrooms and schools powerfully communicates expectations. The research of Jeannie Oakes and others has documented the deleterious effects of tracking on low-achieving students (1985). Conversely, Anne Wheelock's recent book relates the positive effects of untracked schools on students' aspirations (1992). An enormous body of research points to the consistent positive academic and social outcomes of heterogeneous, cooperative learning groups for all students, especially for low-achievers.

Labeling students "at-risk" can set

in motion a vicious self-fulfilling prophecy. No matter how well-meaning, targeted programs that label children as "at risk" may be doing more harm than good. As educator Herb Kohl states:

Although I've taught in East Harlem, in Berkeley, and in rural California, I have never taught an *at-risk* student in my life. The term is racist. It defines a child as pathological, based on what he or she might do rather than on anything he or she has actually done (Nathan 1991).

Furthermore, research consistently shows us that 50 to 80 percent of students with multiple risks in their lives do succeed, especially if they experience a caring school environment that conveys high expectations.

Youth Participation

Providing youth with the opportunities for meaningful involvement and responsibility within the school is a natural outcome in schools that have high expectations. According to Rutter, in the schools with low levels of delinquency, children

were given a lot of responsibility. They participated very actively in all sorts of things that went on in the school; they were treated as responsible people and they reacted accordingly (Rutter et al. 1979).

The High/Scope Educational Research Foundation's 15-year study of the Perry Preschool Project demonstrates the importance of creating opportunities for participation from an early age. This study discovered that when children from an impoverished inner-city environment were given the

opportunities to plan and make decisions in their preschool, they were, at the age of 19, significantly less (as much as 50 percent) involved in drug use, delinquency, teen pregnancy, or school failure (Berruta-Clement et al. 1984). Furthermore, the recently published

study of this population at age 27 found that project participants have committed far fewer crimes, have higher earnings, and possess a greater commitment to marriage than adults from similar backgrounds (Weikart and Schweinhart 1993).

Participation, like caring and support, is a fundamental human need—the need to have some control over one's life. Several educational reformers believe that when schools ignore these basic needs of both kids and adults, they become alienating places (Glasser 1990, Wehlage et al. 1989). According to Seymour Sarason:

When one has no stake in the way things are, when one's needs or opinions are provided no forum, when one sees oneself as the object of unilateral actions, it takes no particular wisdom to suggest that one would rather be elsewhere (1990).

The challenge for our schools is to engage children by providing them opportunities to participate in meaningful activities and roles. There are many ways to infuse participation into the school day. Some examples include: giving students more opportunities to respond to questions; asking their opinions on issues; asking questions that encourage critical, reflective thinking; making learning more hands-on; involving students in curriculum planning; using participatory evaluation strategies; and employing approaches like cooperative learning, peer helping, cross-age mentoring, and community service. Such strategies bond young people to

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their school community and can promote all the traits of resiliency—social competence, problem solving, autonomy, and a sense of a bright future.

Acknowledge Your Resiliency

Evidence demonstrates that a nurturing school climate has the power to overcome incredible risk factors in the lives of children. What is far less acknowledged is that creating this climate for students necessitates creating this environment for all school personnel. Paraphrasing Sarason, whatever factors, variables, and ambience are conducive for the growth, development, and self-regard of students are precisely those that are crucial to obtaining the same consequences for a school's staff (1990).

It's hard to be caring and supportive, to have high expectations, and to involve students in decision making without support, respect, or opportunities to work collegially with others. Fostering resiliency in young people is ultimately an "inside-out" process that depends on educators taking care of themselves. In *Winning Teachers, Teaching Winners*, Patricia Munson advises teachers to

choose to see yourself and others as winners. Look for things to acknowledge yourself for, rather than stuff to make yourself feel wrong about. No one outside yourself can make you happy. You have to do it for yourself. And your students need to learn that, too. It is one of the keys that will assist them to be able to create anything they want in their lives (1991).

To see the strengths in children, we must see our own strengths; to look beyond their risks and see their resiliency means acknowledging our own inner resiliency. ■

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