



Helping Children Develop Resiliency

Providing Supportive Relationships



Katharine C. Kersey and
Catherine Robertson Malley



Janie's mother was homeless and addicted to drugs when she gave birth. For the first three years of Janie's life, she was moved from shelter to shelter and was often cared for by strangers. Today Janie is in her second year of medical school, studying to be a pediatrician.

Many children who begin life like Janie do not achieve success. In Janie's case, intervention came when an aunt adopted her at the age of three. This wise and caring woman provided a stable environment in which Janie was able to develop her resiliency—"struggle muscles" that enabled Janie to bounce back with confidence and a healthy self-esteem. Resiliency is "the set of attributes that provide people with the

strength and fortitude to confront the overwhelming obstacles they are bound to face in life" (Sagor 1996, 38).

In today's complicated, mobile, and fragmented society, there are numerous reasons why many children might have difficulty making healthy adjustments. However, the strange truth is that despite incredible hardships and severe risks, many children are able to develop the coping skills and other strengths that make it possible for them to succeed. Why then are some children able to beat the heavy odds against them and others not?

Resilience: Lessons from the literature

Resiliency is a popular topic in current educational research and literature. This article defines the

Katharine C. Kersey, EdD, is chair of the Department of Early Childhood, Speech Pathology, and Special Education at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia. She is a professor of early childhood education, the author of three books on parenting, and coauthor of *The First Year Teacher*, published by the National Education Association.

Catherine Robertson Malley, MEd, is a first grade teacher at Bayside Elementary School in Virginia Beach. She has also taught children in preschool, most recently at the Old Dominion University Child Study Center.

importance of encouraging children to develop the characteristics related to resiliency including confidence in their ability to overcome challenges and frustrations. Critical resources that can help children build resiliency are outlined as well as teaching strategies for creating supportive relationships.

Caring, committed adults

Many studies on developing resiliency in children agree on the positive impact of one core component—the involvement of a caring adult. The committed interest and support of one adult can make a dramatic difference in a child’s life. Psychotherapist Alice Miller calls this adult a “helping witness” (Miller 2001). The adult, often a teacher, helps children living in stressful circumstances to experience love and acceptance. Others have called this person a “charismatic adult,” referring to an adult from whom children gather strength and with whom they can identify (Brooks & Goldstein 2004, 16).

Teachers can assume this role by creating positive learning environments for children. They can model their belief that life is doable and that mistakes are opportunities to learn. They realize that when children use self-defeating behaviors, such as acting out, bullying, clowning, or giving up, they may be masking feelings of hopelessness, vulnerability, and low self-esteem. Supportive teachers help all children find ways to make genuine contributions to the class by capitalizing on their interests and abilities. Charismatic adults find ways to help children celebrate their uniqueness and take ownership, control, and responsibility for their behavior. They provide opportunities that allow children to learn how to make good choices and to problem solve at an early age.

Shapiro and his fellow authors assert that for many children considered at risk, the key to early achievement begins with building relationships: “Locate a resilient kid and you will also find a caring adult—or several—who guided him” (1996, 63). When children who have lived in poverty successfully make it into the middle class, they are asked how they made the journey. Many times the answer has to do with a relationship—a teacher, counselor, or coach who made a suggestion or took an interest in them as individuals (Payne 1998, 143).

The characteristics that help children deal more effectively with stress and pressure and become resilient are the focus of the work of Brooks and Goldstein (2003). Teachers have a powerful ability to encourage, motivate, and energize their students if they can identify and help children display their unique “islands of competence” (Brooks & Goldstein 2004, 18).

Connor’s kindergarten teacher cuts out basketball scores from the morning paper and brings them in so Connor can chart his team’s progress. She knows that Connor’s dad is a tennis coach and that the boy has been playing sports almost since he could walk.

Hannah’s teacher has begun to bring classical music into the classroom so four-year-old Hannah can tell her classmates about the operas she has seen and show pictures of instruments and musicians. The child’s father and mother are both musicians. She frequently hums arias while she works.

Many teachers are unaware of their impact on the children they teach. When teachers take the time to learn students’ names, greet them at the door, smile more frequently, make themselves more available when children are having

trouble, and think about the way they speak with children, they have more time for teaching. Meaningful connections between teachers and students will aid in the prevention of discipline problems.

Mrs. Hitchings, a first grade teacher, loves cats. She has pictures of cats all over the room, recently brought a cat doctor in to talk with the children about proper care of cats, and frequently takes her class to the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals for field trips. Joanie, a class member with a pet cat, has fallen in love with Mrs. Hitchings and works hard to please her. They have frequent conversations about their favorite subject.

Mrs. DeRolf teaches her minister’s son. Every Sunday, when they see each other at church, they have a special smile and greeting. When Monday comes, Ben tells her that he saw her in church. He would do anything for his teacher with whom he feels this special connection.

Clearly, when teachers experience fewer discipline problems, they have more time for effective instruction. Bluestein observes that academic success, effective classroom management strategies, and healthy social and emotional development of students all begin with positive meaningful connections (2001). A former elementary classroom instructor, Bluestein discusses the importance of the teacher in modeling appropriate behavior. “Kids need to know that an adult will be there for them, and that we are capable of intervening and supporting them without making things worse. This means learning to listen, pay attention, and take kids seriously in ways that we perhaps never have before” (2001, 286).

Locate a resilient kid and you will also find a caring adult—or several—who guided him.

Children’s inner resources

From her work on understanding the effects of poverty, Ruby Payne suggests that teachers and ad-

ministrators have always known that “relationships make the difference—sometimes all the difference—in what can happen in a school” (1998, 143). She describes a variety of personal resources that can support children’s success in school. These resources include those that are

- emotional—the ability to choose and control responses;
 - mental—intelligence and acquired skills such as reading and writing;
 - spiritual—belief in a higher power and divine guidance;
 - physical—health and mobility.
- (Payne 1998, 16–17)

These resources are potential resiliency factors. Recognizing the broad array of possible resources for each individual, Payne (1998) presents a variety of strategies that enable teachers to capitalize on the resources that children bring with them, helping them to become successful learners.

In a game or learning activity the teacher often calls on Amos to lead other children. Although only five years old, he is the oldest of four children and is often called on to take charge at home; his leadership skills emerge in the classroom too.

Another child, Michael, has lived in several shelters in several different cities. He is able to talk with firsthand experience about riding on trains and subways and draws very convincing pictures when his kindergarten class is studying transportation.

Payne discusses the need to overcome the perception that children living in poverty are less able to meet high academic standards. Rather than lacking intelligence, the children often do not have cognitive strategies needed for academic success. These strategies can be modeled by the teacher, using story structure (beginning, middle, and end), sequencing, and “mind mapping.” These techniques are powerful because they can work for every child, especially those who live in

Connecting to Teach RESILIENCE

Kathy Gradeles, a third grade teacher in an inner-city school in Norfolk, Virginia (and committed to implement the recommendations of Ruby Payne), has found many simple ways to connect to children and help them feel that they belong and are significant. She knows that it is important to establish trust and she does this in many ways. She lets the children know that she is trustworthy (lives up to her promises) and that she expects them to do the same.

Kathy tells teachers they must clearly outline their expectations for children’s classroom behavior. Providing structure, routine, and predictability will help children meet these expectations. She believes it is necessary to teach children “school ways.” She refers to these as “school choices” rather than right or wrong choices (emphasizing the wisdom of not casting judgment on families or neighborhoods). Teaching children procedures such as the proper care of materials and how to line up so they can move quietly through the halls contributes to a smooth-running classroom.

Kathy’s classroom schedule gives students time to do homework at school since some home environments may not be conducive to studying. She tries to be flexible—allowing a child some slack when he or she is down—and gets to know her children’s worlds as much as possible. She accepts invitations to family and community events and celebrations and invites parents to the classroom. By taping class events and sending the videos home for families to watch, she can connect further with parents (some of whom may never feel comfortable in the school setting) and help them understand their child’s school experiences.

Kathy also finds ways to bring the children into *her* world, sharing her interests, phone number, photos, and culture and even entertaining children in her home when possible. Two strategies she finds to be effective ways to connect with children are to eat lunch with them and hold class meetings every day. Meetings give the children an opportunity to talk about their world and their worries—their “glads,” “mads,” and “sads,” and to be heard by a caring adult.

Dozens of children have found this teacher to be their “enlightened witness” (Miller 2001) and continue to call her and stay connected long after they leave the third grade.

unpredictable and random environments (Payne 1998, 123).

Garnezy, Masten, and Tellegen (1984), Rutter (1985), and Werner and Smith (1992) have also studied the characteristics of resilient children. These researchers found that resilient youngsters assume accountability for themselves and act

responsibly toward others. They have developed skills, hobbies, talents, and interests and feel a genuine sense of control over what happens in their lives. They have had to look out for and help others and have the determination to per-

Kids need to know that an adult will be there for them, and that we are capable of intervening and supporting them without making things worse.

sist in the face of failure. They possess social skills and can laugh at themselves. They have a sense of belonging, a reason for being, and a purpose for living.

Supportive environments

Other research has focused on the transition from risk to resilience in the prevention of antisocial behavior. Benard (1993) identifies “protective factors” for children: a caring environment, positive expectations, and participation in home, school, and outside activities. She concludes that “Given the incredible stresses the family system is now experiencing, school has become a vital refuge. . . . Despite overwhelming pressures in the environment, 75 to 80 percent of children can use school activities as a support for healthy adjustment and achievement when schools are sensitive to them and their burdens” (1993, 46). In preschool and elementary school, a caring educational environment helps to strengthen resiliency.

Embry (1997) advocates a “peaceful environment” that promotes competencies in thinking and emotional responses. He argues that not all of our schools foster peaceful environments and that some are actually the antithesis of what is needed to build resiliency in children.

Certain factors present in a peaceful environment include permission for adults to touch children in positive ways and a focus on positive behavior. As a teacher welcomes, encourages, and gently touches children daily, serotonin pathways in the brain are activated. Children feel a sense of safety, be-

longing, and importance. In contrast, children who experience low levels of serotonin may be prone to aggressive or angry behavior. Keeping the focus on positive behavior, such as cooperation versus competition, will also decrease aggressive behavior (Embry 1997).

Prevention of inappropriate behavior is the key. A teacher who has respectful routines and procedures in place will avoid discipline challenges that occur during transitions. A teacher who has established a safe environment for risk taking will reduce teasing and bullying behaviors. A positive classroom environment with high expectations for all learners creates a climate in which children help each other more and feel good about themselves.

Embry suggests reading positive stories and using positive teacher behaviors to support young children’s development of resiliency. Positive stories present role models and serve as examples of success that provide reinforcement and a sense of belonging

for children. Teachers should read to children on a regular basis using a wide variety of literature that models resilient characteristics. Read-aloud sessions should be accompanied by discussions about

the characters and how they overcame challenges to succeed. Several well-known children’s classics illustrate this point. *The Little Engine That Could* (1930), by Watty Piper, is about perseverance. *Charlotte’s Web* (1952), by E.B. White, demonstrates

the importance of friends and supportive relationships. *The Giving Tree* (1964), by Shel Silverstein, presents characters who accept gifts of love from each other. Additional resources are available in every school library (Rovenger 2000).

Positive teacher behaviors that show compassion and respect involve knowing all children by name, encouraging the participation of those who may not easily join in, making extra efforts to connect and bond with *every* child, and helping children learn how to problem solve when they are having difficulties.

The school’s role as a caring community is outlined by educator Martin Krovetz. Krovetz (1999) concludes through his research in elementary schools that developing resiliency is about “dedicating our hearts and minds to creating communities that are rich in caring, high expectations and purposeful support, and opportunities for meaningful participation. It is the understanding that the culture and daily practices of schools need to be redesigned in ways that demonstrate a deep commitment to the potential of all students” (1999, 32).

Resilient youngsters assume accountability for themselves and act responsibly toward others. They have developed skills, hobbies, talents, and interests and feel a genuine sense of control over what happens in their lives.

Adults modeling respect and resilience

To be able to foster resiliency in children, teachers need to constantly strengthen their own coping strategies. Caring adults who demonstrate respect, tolerance, and empathy are a positive source of strength for students (Ferguson 2000). When we help children to build resilience, we further develop the qualities of caring, empathy, and respect for others in our personal and professional lives. Brooks and Goldstein write, "A resilient mindset provides a basic foundation and reservoir of emotional strength that can be called on to manage daily challenges" (2004, x).

DuFour and Eaker (1998) outline positive celebration and recognition strategies for teachers, staff, and students. They describe ways that the entire school community can

focus on achievements, unique contributions, or even simple accomplishments by taking pictures, making announcements over the intercom, or giving "great moment certificates."

The significance of these approaches is that they can begin to change the climate and culture of schools by reinforcing shared values, such as respect for self and others, honoring multicultural diversity, and instilling in children the belief that they can meet high academic expectations. Creating positive school environments in which every child feels special and each child is encouraged to safely develop his struggle muscles will help all children achieve success and emerge as healthy, contributing members of society.

Conclusion

"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" (Benard 1993, 49). Children and adults thrive in emotionally safe environments. People who experience love, protection, and understanding will develop a capacity for caring and empathy for others. Adults and children must be recognized for the "islands of competence" that define their unique abilities and talents (Brooks & Goldstein 2004, 18). Mistakes are simply growth experiences for the resilient person. Helping children develop resiliency begins with positive, meaningful connections between teachers and students.

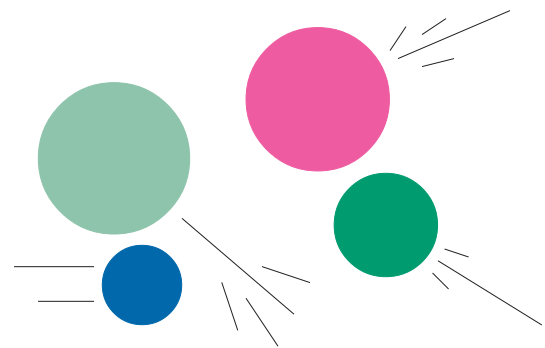
Education is about inviting every single person who enters a school to realize his or her relatively boundless potential in all areas of worthwhile human endeavor.—William Purkey (as quoted in Bluestein 2001, 230)

World Report 121 (19): 62–70.
Werner, E., & R. Smith. 1992. *Overcoming the odds: High-risk children from birth to adulthood*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

References

- Benard, B. 1993. Fostering resiliency in kids. *Educational Leadership* 51 (3): 44–49.
- Bluestein, J. 2001. *Creating emotionally safe schools: A guide for educators and parents*. Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications.
- Brooks, R., & S. Goldstein. 2003. *Nurturing resilience in our children*. Chicago: Contemporary Books.
- Brooks, R., & S. Goldstein. 2004. *The power of resilience: Achieving balance, confidence and personal strength in your life*. Chicago: Contemporary Books.
- Dufour, R., & R. Eaker. 1998. *Professional learning communities at work: Best practices for enhancing student achievement*. Bloomington, IN: National Education Service.
- Embry, D. 1997. Does your school have a peaceful environment? Using an audit to create a climate for change and resiliency. *Intervention in School and Clinic* 32 (4): 217–23.
- Ferguson, D. 2000. Re-examining at-risk. *Curriculum Administrator* 36: 79–84.
- Garmezy, N., A. Masten, & A. Tellegen. 1984. The study of stress and competence in children: A building block for developmental psychopathology. *Child Development* 55: 97–111.
- Krovetz, M. 1999. Fostering resiliency. *Thrust for Educational Leadership* 28 (5): 28–31.
- Miller, A. 2001. *The truth will set you free*. New York: Basic.
- Payne, R. 1998. *A framework for understanding poverty*. Highlands, TX: aha! Process.
- Rovenger, J. 2000. Fostering emotional intelligence. *School Library Journal* 46 (12): 40–43.
- Rutter, M. 1985. Resilience in the face of adversity: Protective factors and resistance to psychiatric disorder. *British Journal of Psychiatry* 147: 589–611.
- Sagor, R. 1996. Building resiliency in students. *Educational Leadership* 54: 38–44.
- Shapiro, J., D. Friedman, M. Meyer, & M. Loftus. 1996. Invincible kids. *U.S. News &*

**Helping children
develop resiliency begins
with positive, meaningful
connections between
teachers and students.**



Copyright © 2005 by the National Association for the Education of Young Children. See Permissions and Reprints online at www.journal.naeyc.org/about/permissions.asp.