

## About Resilience and Schools

As described by the Center for the Study of Social Policy, resilience is a dynamic process that entails positive coping and successful developmental outcomes in spite of the presence of adverse conditions. It is not the absence of personal struggling with adverse conditions; it is the ability to cope with and make a positive recovery from such conditions. In the past, resilience was considered a personality trait. Currently, it is understood as a process any individual can attain, and it is seen as situational.

*The concept of resilience has as its starting point the recognition that there is huge heterogeneity in people's responses to all manner of environmental adversities. Resilience is an inference based on evidence that some individuals have a better outcome than others who have experienced a comparable level of adversity; moreover, the negative experience may have either a sensitizing effect or a strengthening "steeling" effect in relation to the response to later stress or adversity.*

Michael Rutter

In reviewing the literature, Rutter (2012) stresses the importance of accounting for environmental mediation of risk and gene-environment interaction. He notes evidence that the genetic influences involve responsivity to all environments and not just bad ones and underscores turning point effects associated with experiences that increase opportunities and enhance coping.

The school environment is an especially critical one for students and staff. Because success at school always requires effective coping and because ineffective coping contributes to a range of problems, enhancing coping and recovery are important school improvement considerations. At the same time, schools need to reduce barriers that interfere with learning and teaching.

Those who manifest effective coping and recovery behaviors are seen as resilient individuals. Such behavior reflects the individual's motivation, knowledge, and skills and can be facilitated by contextual supports. Such supports include

- promoting well-being
- preventing problems
- enhancing student and staff resiliency
- ensuring there is an effective system of interventions that
  - >protect and buffer students and staff from adversity and
  - >assist them in coping with and recovering from problems.

Unfortunately, these matters continue to be marginalized in school improvement policy and practice.

### Factors Related to the Development of Resilience

Resilience may derive from factors both internal and external to a child:

1. Attributes of the Child (e.g., feelings of hope and meaningfulness of life)
2. Aspects of the Family (e.g., strong relationship with a caring, prosocial parent or parent-figure)
3. Characteristics of the Social Environments (e.g., opportunities to learn and experience mastery; opportunities to be mentored by a competent, caring adult)

Center for the Study of Social Policy

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## Protective Factors and Resilience for Students and School Staff

There is no magical resilience gene. When we think that kids just need willpower to overcome adversity, we miss opportunities to provide the relationships and build the skills that can actually strengthen resilience.

Jack Shonkoff

Protective factors are conditions that buffer against the impact of barriers (risk factors). Such conditions may prevent or counter risk producing conditions by promoting development of neighborhood, family, school, peer, and individual strengths, assets, corrective interventions, coping mechanisms, and special assistance and accommodations. The term resilience often is used to refer to an individual's ability to cope in ways that buffer.

While efforts to reduce risks and enhance protection can help minimize problems and promote resilience, a focus on promoting healthy development goes a step further by focusing on establishing systems that foster full development, well-being, and a value-based life. Safe, stable schools and neighborhoods that provide enriched opportunities to promote student development, learning, and a sense of community go well beyond just strengthening resilience.

Many protective buffers are outcomes of efforts to engender full development. Promoting healthy development is the other side of the coin to addressing barriers to learning and development. Done well, such interventions engender resilient behavior, individual assets, and healthy behavior in children and adolescents.

With respect to promoting full development, as often is stressed, being problem-free is not the same as being well-developed. Efforts to enhance protection and reduce risks can help minimize problems but are insufficient for promoting full development, well-being, and a value-based life. Those concerned with establishing systems for promoting healthy development recognize the need for direct efforts to promote development and empowerment, including the mobilization of individuals for self-pursuit. In many cases, interventions to create buffers and promote full development are identical, and the pay-off is the cultivation of developmental strengths and assets. However, promoting healthy development is not limited to countering risks and engendering protective factors. Efforts to promote full development represent ends which are valued in and of themselves and to which most of us aspire.

## About Direct Efforts to Enhance Resilience at School

As schools focus more on whole child development, they are more and more concerned with social and emotional development and the interfering nature of social and emotional problems. As part of these concerns, there is increasing interest in enhancing resilience.

Child Trends and their partners on the National Center for Safe and Supportive Learning Environments stress the following as general strategies to build resilience in schools:

- Promote positive social connections between staff and students, among students, and between schools and home.
- Nurture positive qualities, such as empathy, optimism, or forgiveness, and give students a chance to use them.
- Notice and reinforce qualities that are key to resilience.
- Avoid focusing on failure or negative behaviors.
- Teach by example, which is an effective approach; train staff to develop the same qualities.
- Apply restorative justice techniques can help schools by giving students a structured opportunity to work difficulties out by encouraging reflection and empathy.
- Foster feelings of competence and self-efficacy.
- Set high expectations for students; teach them to set realistic, achievable goals, and also how to reach out for help when needed.

With respect to recovery, they stress:

- Supportive relationships are key to recovery: Make sure students have time to talk with caring adults and have the opportunity to express their feelings and ask questions.
- Schools can provide supports to parents by sponsoring parent meetings.
- Stay flexible! Children's responses to a traumatic event will be varied not just in intensity, but also in recovery time; it is important for schools to avoid a one-size-fits-all response to recovery.
- After a traumatic event, students may feel nervous, anxious, or unsafe so try to reassure students that they are safe, and keep to familiar routines.
- School administrators can provide extra support to teachers, such as training, time to unwind and ways to connect with other teachers for support.

From: *Strategies that Build Resilience in Schools*, see Child Trends' synthesis at

>[http://www.childtrends.org/what-can-schools-do-to-build-resilience-in-their-students/?utm\\_source=E-News](http://www.childtrends.org/what-can-schools-do-to-build-resilience-in-their-students/?utm_source=E-News)  
><http://www.childtrends.org/what-can-schools-do-to-build-resilience-in-their-students/>

Resilient children are children who remain competent despite exposure to misfortune or to stressful events. ...

Characteristics of resilient children include:

- A sense of self-esteem and self-efficacy, which allows the child to cope successfully with challenges
- An active stance toward an obstacle or difficulty
- The ability to see a difficulty as a problem that can be worked on, overcome, changed, endured, or resolved in some way
- Reasonable persistence, with an ability to know when "enough is enough"
- A capacity to develop a range of strategies and skills to bear on the problem, which can be used in a flexible way...

Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory

<http://www.nwrel.org/pirc/hot9.html>

It must be noted that, while programs for schools to build resilience are widely touted (e.g., Child Trends What Works database; SAMHSA's National Registry of Evidence Programs and Practices; the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning), findings from a meta-analysis of data from programs evaluated with a randomized control design suggest that such programs had only a small to moderate effect at improving resilience (Leppin, et al., 2014).

### **Enhancing Student Resilience to Cope and Recover with Depression and Anxiety at the College Level**

By the time they reach college, many students feel unprepared for coping with the social and emotional challenges they experience (Martinez, 2013). So programs such as the Resilience Peer Network at UCLA are being designed to enhance availability of care to the students who have difficulty accessing timely treatment through the campus' existing treatment centers. The UCLA intervention is described as "self-guided internet based cognitive behavioral therapy." It is intended to bring "effective internet-delivered treatment to students with mild to moderate depression and anxiety. Trained undergraduate and graduate Resilience Peers provide individual and group therapy to students appropriately screened for this tier of treatment, under the close supervision of licensed professionals."

<https://grandchallenges.ucla.edu/happenings/2016/01/18/resilience-peer-network/>

## Build a System of Supports

Besides improving student and staff coping and recovery, any school where large numbers of students manifest learning, behavior, and emotional problems needs to implement a continuum of interventions with content that covers the range of challenges encountered each day. The continuum must address barriers (reducing risks, enhancing buffers) and promote full development. Policy makers and researchers must move beyond the narrow set of empirically supported programs to a research and development agenda that unifies student and learning supports and develops a comprehensive and equitable system for addressing barriers to learning and teaching. In doing so, they will enhance protective buffers (including reducing risks), promote healthy development, and strengthen student and staff resiliency (see Adelman & Taylor, 2006, 2010, 2017).

## Concluding Comments

Resilience refers to an individual's ability to cope with challenges and recover from adversity. There is growing realization that schools need to embed a focus on fostering resilience into efforts to facilitate social and emotional development and to begin this at the onset of schooling. Learning to cope effectively with challenges and being able to recover from adversity are as important as learning arithmetic. Failure to cope effectively contributes to a variety of mental health concerns and overwhelms the ability of efforts to support students (and staff).

At the same time, research clearly indicates that external factors (related to neighborhood, family, school, and/or peers) are primary challenges causing most learning, behavior, and emotional problems manifested at school. Schools must proactively improve how they address such challenges. With protective buffers in mind, a first step in focusing on resilience is to improve the way the school (a) promotes well-being and prevents problems, (b) responds as soon as problems arise, and (c) plays an appropriate role related to addressing severe and chronic problems. Over the long-run, the need is to transform student and learning supports by developing a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of interventions that address barriers to learning and teaching, enhance protective buffers, and promote social and emotional development. By doing so, schools can not only foster student and staff resilience, they can also reduce the number of students in need of special assistance.

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For more references and resources, see the Center document “Protective Factors/Resiliency” at <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/sampler/resiliency/resilien.pdf>