



The emerging field of 'resilience' is providing practitioners in education, psychology and social welfare with renewed optimism and hope that they can make a positive difference in the lives of the young people they work with. Dr Toni NOBLE explores how schools can provide an enabling environment for students to develop the skills of resilience.

Teaching resilience – helping kids bounce back

There are many definitions of resilience but all refer to the capacity of an individual to 'overcome odds' and demonstrate the personal strengths needed to cope with hardship or adversity.

Matthew is one young person who demonstrates this resilience. He is just 13 but all his life he has been in and out of foster homes. His mother, a single mum with chronic schizophrenia, lives on welfare and requires hospitalisation due to her mental illness. From an early age Matthew has demonstrated many coping skills. Since kindergarten he has often dressed himself in the mornings and organised his own breakfast so he could go to school. When he was eight, his sister was born and he took on many parenting responsibilities such as changing, feeding and playing with her when Mum wasn't coping well. He has also done well academically at school. He is comfortable with his classmates and has friends he hangs around with at school, although he doesn't like to bring friends home because of Mum's illness.

When Mum is sick she often refuses to have any contact with her children. From a young age Matthew has been able to distance himself psychologically from this distressing situation and reason that things will be better when she is well again. Because his family lives on welfare Matthew has already worked out that the best avenue to gain a university degree is to join the armed forces. His capacity to set both short and long term goals, and plan how he can fulfil these goals, is another indicator of his

resilience.

Kids like Matthew who cope, despite significant difficulties or ongoing adversity, have encouraged us to ask the following questions. What are the personal skills that help them cope and what are the environmental protective factors in their lives that serve as a safety net? What are the implications for educators? How can we teach these skills and how can we create protective school and classroom environments that will help *all* kids develop resilience? And, finally, in what ways might this practice help educators to be more resilient and hopeful in their own personal and professional lives?

The construct of resilience emerged from longitudinal developmental studies of 'at risk' children like Matthew. These studies showed that despite encountering many life stressors as they grew up, some children were survivors and demonstrated confidence and competence in several areas of their life.

Although most young people are happy, well-adjusted and optimistic, roughly a quarter of adolescents are at risk of experiencing a mental disorder (eg, anxiety, depression, mood disorders, drug-related illnesses). Depression has been called the common cold of mental illness, with the average age for the onset of depression now 14 years compared to 29 years 20 years ago¹. Depression frequently combines with substance-abuse, conduct disorders, anxiety disorders, eating disorders and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder.

Human resilience is a complex

concept and to develop it we need a multi-faceted approach that incorporates protective environmental processes and the skills of resilience.

Protective processes

Young people spend five to six hours per day at school, and it, above all other social institutions, provides unique opportunities for young people to form relationships and meet and work with peers and caring professional adults, thereby offering young people hope and pathways for their future. School connectedness simply means how well students feel they belong to a school that accepts, protects, and cares about them, affirms them as people with positive qualities, and provides them with meaningful and satisfying learning experiences in a psychologically and physically safe environment.

Connecting with their peers is one of the main reasons kids come to school. Schools can establish the social structures that enhance the development of peer relationships and foster a sense of acceptance, belonging and fitting in, such as cooperative learning groups, classroom meetings and peer support groups.

The quality of teaching and the teacher-student relationship, above all else, makes the most significant difference to student learning outcomes. Teachers connect with their students by modelling resilient attitudes and skills, establishing a collaborative classroom climate, communicating warmth and positive expectations, adopting

classroom practices, such as academic support and curriculum differentiation, that affirm student strengths, having clear and consistent boundaries, and by taking the time to get to know their students as people, not just pupils.

Having an adult in their life who is not a parent or sibling, but who is accessible and caring towards them and believes in them, is a highly significant protective resource for young people. Often this person is a teacher. For Matthew his grandma has been the one person who has always been there for him. Caring about a young person means seeing the possibilities in them and having a sense of concern and compassion for their wellbeing.

Building strong family-school links, especially for students at risk, has also been shown to be an important protective factor.

Opportunities for positive community involvement, such as participation in sports teams, art and drama groups and membership of prosocial youth groups, is one of the most prevalent protective factors². Schools are in an excellent position to help kids connect with their local community. Matthew's school has worked closely with the two welfare organisations involved in supporting his family. Schools can also organise kids' involvement in community service to help them develop resilient skills such as resourcefulness, initiative, goal setting, and prosocial values.

Personal coping skills

A recent large-scale meta-analysis of school-based programs designed to reduce school violence and increase students' coping skills found that the benefits of any short term program were not sustained³. The study concluded that the best programs started early in primary school, revisited key concepts in developmentally appropriate ways over time, explicitly taught the targeted skills, used cognitive-behavioural techniques and were best integrated with the curriculum rather than added-on.

Teaching students to be optimistic helps them find the positive in negative situations; perceive that bad situations are temporary; acknowledge that bad situations are not all their fault; and believe that bad situations are specific and do not necessarily flow over into all aspects of their lives. Optimism also creates a sense of purpose and hope for

the future.

Many young people become unnecessarily distressed and despairing because they distort a situation or hold irrational beliefs. Teaching kids to use evidence-based helpful thinking can assist them to overcome unhelpful thinking. Useful techniques include, looking for evidence and cross-checking with others to get a second opinion; and acknowledging that how you think affects how you feel and that emotions, though powerful, can be managed.

Developing skills in resourcefulness are also helpful. For example:

- Knowing own strengths and limitations and being prepared to work hard and not give up despite obstacles.
- Setting, planning and achieving realistic goals and being able to organise oneself. Such skills result in a sense of optimism as well as higher levels of self esteem and self-efficacy (the belief that you can do it).
- Decision making and creative problem solving.
- Adaptive distancing from distressing and unalterable situations.

Many studies have demonstrated that



young people with well-developed social skills are more likely to be resilient. Believing that relationships really matter is the starting point for learning social skills, friendship skills, conflict management skills, and help-seeking skills. Also having supportive relationships with others creates a sense of belonging, companionship and healthy self esteem.

Emotional literacy is another protective factor that incorporates the skills to accurately name and manage one's own emotions as well as develop empathy for others.

Healthy self esteem is also closely linked to resilience, and includes a sense of personal competence and a realistic and positive self-knowledge about one's

strengths and limitations, based on sound evidence rather than wishful thinking. Achieving this requires self reflection and reality testing.

Life is a bumpy journey and everyone experiences setbacks, frustrations and hard times at different stages in their lives. Some students, like Matthew, experience extraordinary challenges. Therefore the greater the number of protective resources and processes in their lives, the more likely they are to survive, and even thrive. We can't protect young people from the stress of all potential adverse life events but we, as educators, can make a significant contribution to their welfare and life long learning by teaching them coping skills and creating the class and school environments that promote their resilience.

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The Bounce Back program is co-authored by Helen McGrath and Toni Noble and



published by Pearson Education: www.pearsoned.com.au/educators or Tel: 1800 656 686. It comprises a teacher's handbook and three teacher's resource books: lower primary, middle primary; upper primary to junior secondary.

References

- 1 Seligman, M. (2002). *Authentic Happiness*. Random House, Australia.
- 2 Bond, L., Thomas, L., Toumbourou, J., Patton, G. & Catalano, R., 2000, *Improving the Lives of Young Victorians in Our Community - A survey of Risk and Protective Factors*. Centre for Adolescent Health, Melbourne.
- 3 Scheckner, Rollin, Kaiser-Ulrey & Wagner, 2002, *School violence in children and adolescents: A meta-analysis of the effectiveness of current interventions*. *Journal of School Violence*, Vol.1 (2) pp 5-32.