What is Resilience?

The term resilience is used in mental health to describe a person’s capacity to cope with changes and challenges, and to bounce back during difficult times.

The concept developed from research looking at risk factors for developing mental health problems and substance use. Risk factors are circumstances or experiences which increase the possibility of a person developing a mental health problem or illness, such as having a parent with a mental illness, being bullied or abused, or experiencing a stressful life event.

Research showed that some young people, in spite of having a number of risk factors, adapted very well to life’s changes and did not develop mental health problems. These people came to be described as resilient, able to bounce back even under difficult circumstances.

Researchers became interested in learning more about resilience, trying to find out if resilient young people had anything in common which helped to protect them from developing mental health problems. An understanding of such protective factors might suggest ways in which mental health problems could be prevented or their severity reduced.

What is Social / Emotional Wellbeing?

This term describes a state in which people feel socially and emotionally well and capable. Another term that is sometimes used is mental health, where health is a positive capacity as distinct from illness. These terms relate to particular aspects of a person’s wellbeing that are different from physical health – they include areas such as our feelings, thoughts and relationships.

Being resilient – being able to overcome challenges and setbacks – helps to promote social and emotional wellbeing. A person who is resilient and has positive social / emotional wellbeing is likely to show the following:

- The capacity for positive personal development in several domains, including emotionally, intellectually and creatively
- The capacity to form and maintain positive and respectful relationships with others
- The ability to identify and manage one’s own emotions and to understand the feelings of others
- Skills in communication, including assertiveness, empathy and negotiation
- The ability to solve problems, make informed decisions and accept responsibility for one’s actions
- The capacity to set realistic but rewarding goals and to actively work toward these.

Socially, resilient young people are more caring, responsive to others and have better communication skills. They have a sense of empathy with other people and may have a good sense of humour. As a result, they tend to establish more positive relationships, including friendships with their peers. They may also be more willing to seek help from others when they do experience personal difficulties. This provides the young person with access to an important support network when things become difficult.

Good problem-solving skills help young people to think abstractly, reflectively and flexibly. The resilient young person can develop a range of alternative solutions for their problems and feels able to choose between them. They will tend to show their problem-solving and planning skills
not only in academic tasks, but also in their broader life choices. The way these young people respond to others and to challenges in their life tends to be flexible and constructive.

A sense of autonomy or independence is also helpful. Related concepts include an internal locus of control or a sense of self-efficacy. These ideas relate to a person’s belief in their ability to make a difference, the capacity to make their own decisions and the willingness to take responsibility for the outcomes. This gives people a sense of strength and a feeling that their actions can make a difference in their own lives and those of others, strengthening a person’s self-worth.

Benefits of Resilience and Wellbeing

While everyone encounters difficult times in life, resilient young people have skills and coping strategies to which others may not have access. Under difficult circumstances, resilient people can draw upon their social networks, their flexibility in finding solutions and their strong sense of self, to support them until times improve.

Because of their skills and resources, as well as friendship and support networks, these people are more likely to be able to positively resolve personal problems and difficult events. As a result they will feel more positive and be able to effectively manage the social and emotional areas of their life, much of the time.

This flows on to a reduced risk of mental health or behavioural problems, such as depression, anxiety, suicidal behaviour, substance abuse and antisocial behaviour. There is also emerging evidence that suggests that young people who have such skills and resources are more likely to achieve school success, both in terms of academic outcomes and personal development.

Schools and teachers should take an active role in promoting the wellbeing of young people, because this will help with behaviour management and academic outcomes, as well as contributing to a healthier and happier school community. This is not just an issue for those with a role in student welfare or in teaching health subjects.

Building Resilience and Wellbeing

Resilience and wellbeing are dependent upon both internal and external factors. A person’s innate way of looking at the world and solving problems can influence their resilience and wellbeing – but people can learn new skills to help them respond more positively to life’s challenges. The environment is also important, as people develop working models about social interaction and come to an understanding of what other people expect of them.

In a school setting, creating a supportive and caring environment is important. Young people are likely to behave and perform more positively in a classroom and school in which they feel safe and accepted. Schools can also teach or encourage specific skills (such as communication and problem solving), perhaps in the context of a subject on health or personal development. Such skills can also be incorporated into other learning areas or into a home room or pastoral care period.

This dual focus - on both the school/classroom environment and the incorporation of specific skills into the curriculum – means that all teachers (regardless of their learning area) can benefit from an understanding of how to build resilience and wellbeing. This will make your job easier in terms of behaviour management and promoting learning.

A caring and supportive environment promotes a sense of connection and belonging, aiding the development of resilience. Studies have shown that a caring relationship with just one adult (such as a parent, grandparent or teacher) can enhance resilience significantly. Young people
who have difficult family experiences, such as discord or abuse, may be particularly reliant on a supportive school environment for their wellbeing.

Research suggests that three factors are important in creating an environment that promotes resilience in young people. These are:

- An environment in which caring and support are considered important, creating a sense of connection and belonging.
- Positive expectations of the capacity and behaviour of a young person, with consistent guidelines and support to help them achieve their goals.
- Genuine opportunities for participation and chances to contribute to decision making.

The table on the following page examines how these three factors can be built up across the domains of the family, classroom, school and community. This is not necessarily a complete list – see if you can think of additional examples, particularly those that might be relevant in a classroom or school setting.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Promoting Resilience</th>
<th>Family</th>
<th>Classroom</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>Community</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Caring relationships and sense of belonging</td>
<td>Family members show affection and compassion, model caring relationships. Use good communication styles and show how disputes are resolved; avoid personal put-downs, bullying or excessive criticism. In discipline or disputes, discussion focuses on changing behaviour not blaming people. Family members are actively involved in the community, and have regular contact with friends, neighbours, teachers, schools, church, sporting groups, etc.</td>
<td>Teachers show an interest in students’ academic performance and wellbeing. Teachers use and model positive and caring communication with students and colleagues. Teachers favour teaching styles which offer both praise and constructive feedback. Use a disciplinary style which focuses on behaviour change rather than blame. Teachers are actively involved in the school community beyond their own teaching area, and encourage others to be involved too.</td>
<td>Schools publicly reward both academic and other forms of achievement. Schools provide support and professional development opportunities for staff members. Schools provide welfare and counselling services, and academic flexibility, for those who need extra support. Schools enforce policies (safety, critical incident, bullying, diversity) which help to create a safe and supportive school environment.</td>
<td>Society invests time and resources in educational, social and recreational opportunities for young people. The community provides health, welfare and counselling services for young people. The community invests time and resources in supporting the roles of families, teachers, schools, community groups and other structures that support resilience.</td>
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<td>Positive and high expectations, with support</td>
<td>Family members have clear, realistic and consistent guidelines for their behaviour; everyone in the family expects that others can and will adhere to these guidelines. Family members acknowledge each other’s strengths and achievements, and encourage people to build on these. Parents or carers provide many different opportunities for young people to explore and succeed – eg by encouraging a variety of tasks, hobbies, sports or subjects.</td>
<td>Teachers communicate a belief that young people can achieve their goals and offer support to help them do so. Teachers establish and enforce clear and consistent guidelines for students’ behaviour. Teachers acknowledge the strengths and achievements of each young person. Teachers use a variety of approaches for learning and assessment, to engage students and create opportunities for success.</td>
<td>Schools support a culture of achievement among young people and staff, and offer support to help people reach their goals. Schools establish and enforce acceptable behaviour through policies about discipline, prevention of bullying and substance use. Schools provide varied opportunities for success by offering a variety of curriculum options and extra-curricular activities. Schools give recognition and support for both academic and non-academic achievements.</td>
<td>The community establishes and enforces social and legal guidelines for acceptable behaviour among young people and others. The community recognises the achievements of young people, locally and nationally, through awards, the media, and other means. The community provides a range of opportunities for youth success, with flexible arrangements for young people regarding apprenticeships, employment, education and training, or work experience programs in a variety of industries.</td>
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Opportunities to participate and contribute

Young people have assigned responsibilities and are given the opportunity to participate in discussions and decision-making. Family members listen to and respect each other’s opinions even if they do not agree. All family members are included in planning for and participating in events, holidays and special occasions. Family members spend some time working and playing together, such as in daily activities, cooking, games, sports.

Teachers encourage young people to participate in the classroom and the school. Teachers listen to and respect others’ opinions, and encourage young people and colleagues to do the same in the classroom. Teachers incorporate group work and cooperative activities into their students’ tasks and encourage participation. Teachers encourage young people to develop broader interests in community activities or groups.

Schools invite young people to contribute to decision-making processes and to run selected school events. Young people are given opportunities to foster links with community groups and agencies. Schools encourage staff to use teaching styles which promote classroom participation and links with the community. Schools maintain partnerships with relevant groups and agencies and celebrate diversity.

The community opposes discrimination on the basis of ethnicity, age, religion, sexuality, gender, or disability. Young people have opportunities to become involved in community events and groups. The community invites young people to contribute to decision-making processes, through youth forums and other means. The community listens to and respects the opinions of young people on critical issues affecting youth in Australia.

How can Teachers promote Resilience?

To promote resilience in their students, teachers need to be aware of caring relationships, positive expectations and providing opportunities for participation. Teachers who have a positive effect on young people apply these principles through:

- General relationships with others in the school community
- Teaching style in the classroom
- Disciplinary practices in the classroom and beyond
- School participation and involvement.

Positive relationships with students and with others in the school community help to create a positive school environment and a sense of belonging. This also creates a model for positive behaviour which young people will see and hopefully adopt themselves. Try to maintain a cheerful and helpful approach with students and staff.

Show genuine interest in your students’ academic achievements but also in their other interests such as sport or hobbies. If possible, encourage young people to participate in the broader community as well, perhaps through sporting clubs, drama groups or other community activities. This will help them to develop a stronger sense of belonging both in the school and in the broader community.

It’s helpful to use a teaching style which offers both praise and constructive feedback, while reassuring the young person that you are willing to offer support to help them improve their performance. Avoid judgemental or dismissive feedback and recognise that young people learn in different ways and at different rates. At an individual level, their own capacity for improvement may be more important than their academic position in the class or their long-term career or study goals.

Promote participation and group work in the classroom and encourage young people to listen to and respect others’ opinions, even if they don’t agree. Try to create a classroom environment which respects personal and academic achievement and encourages high expectations. Within the parameters of the curriculum, try to use a variety of tasks for learning and assessment, to maintain interest and to give young people opportunities to learn and succeed in different ways.
Disciplinary styles are also important. Establish and enforce clear and consistent guidelines for behaviour, in the classroom and beyond. Don’t tolerate put-downs, racism or bullying in your classroom. Consider negotiating some rules for behaviour with your students, at the beginning of the year or term.

Rather than appearing judgemental, or blaming individuals or groups, focus on why a behaviour is unacceptable or undesirable and encourage behaviour change. Certainly this involves discipline and you should be aware of the disciplinary procedures in your school, but it also may involve showing support and believing that individuals can change. Negative expectations tend to lead to further negative behaviour. If your school doesn’t have a merit or reward system, consider implementing one in your classroom – for non-academic as well as academic achievements.

Become involved in the life of your school community beyond your own teaching area. This is related to creating positive relationships and encouraging a sense of belonging. This will help to improve your own sense of belonging to the school and you will also be modelling participation and positive relationships to others around you. Becoming involved might include helping out with fund raising, attending student performances, or being involved in cross-curricular special interest groups or working parties. Find ways to become actively involved with students and other staff.

Apart from these general studies, you may find opportunities to promote skills such as problem solving and good communication in your classroom. The MindMatters resources for secondary schools provide many classroom activities that can help you to do this, as do some other programs and resource materials. For more information visit www.mindmatters.edu.au

How can Schools promote Resilience?

To promote resilience in their students, schools need to have strategies in place to support and care for teachers and students, to communicate high expectations and to encourage participation.

Schools can demonstrate caring relationships by providing support and professional development for staff and by providing welfare and support services for students. In addition, schools can show an interest in students beyond their academic performance, by encouraging and recognising social, sporting and other achievements as well as academic outcomes.

Schools that have positive and high expectations support a culture of achievement among young people and staff. They also establish and enforce clear and consistent guidelines for acceptable behaviour and should have sound policies about discipline, prevention of bullying and substance use. This will help to create a supportive environment in which everyone feels safe and respected. In addition, schools can provide varied opportunities for success by offering a variety of curriculum options and extra-curricular activities. An experience of success, even in one or two areas, may help young people to be more resilient.

Schools can also choose to provide opportunities for participation and for young people to contribute to the broader school community. Examples may include inviting young people to contribute to decision-making processes, giving them responsibility for a range of activities within the school, encouraging teaching styles which promote classroom participation and encouraging young people to participate in community groups and activities.
Again, these may sound like very general strategies, but a school needs to maintain an ongoing commitment to this approach in order to make these strategies work. The benefits for the school community and for individuals will be worth the effort.

Sources and Further Reading


