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# Fostering Resilience in Children. ERIC Digest.



This digest summarizes a growing body of international, cross-cultural, longitudinal studies that provide scientific evidence that many youth--even those with multiple and severe risks in their lives--can develop into "confident, competent, and caring adults" (Werner & Smith, 1992); and discusses the critical role schools can play in this process.

# THE NATURE OF RESILIENCE

Some longitudinal studies, several of which follow individuals over the course of a lifespan, have consistently documented that between half and two-thirds of children growing up in families with mentally ill, alcoholic, abusive, or criminally involved parents or in poverty-stricken or war-torn communities do overcome the odds and turn a life trajectory of risk into one that manifests "resilience," the term used to describe a set of qualities that foster a process of successful adaptation and transformation despite risk and adversity. Resilience research validates prior research and theory in human development that has clearly established the biological imperative for growth and development that exists in the human organism and that unfolds naturally in the presence of certain environmental characteristics. We are all born with an innate capacity for resilience, by which we are able to develop social competence, problem-solving skills, a critical consciousness, autonomy, and a sense of purpose. SOCIAL COMPETENCE includes qualities such as responsiveness, especially the ability to elicit positive responses from others; flexibility, including the ability to move between different cultures; empathy; communication skills; and a sense of humor. PROBLEM-SOLVING SKILLS encompass the ability to plan; to be resourceful in seeking help from others; and to think critically, creatively, and reflectively. In the development of a CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS, a reflective awareness of the structures of oppression (be it from an alcoholic parent, an insensitive school, or a racist society) and creating strategies for overcoming them has been key.

AUTONOMY is having a sense of one's own identity and an ability to act independently and to exert some control over one's environment, including a sense of task mastery, internal locus of control, and self-efficacy. The development of resistance (refusing to accept negative messages about oneself) and of detachment (distancing oneself from dysfunction) serves as a powerful protector of autonomy. Lastly, resilience is manifested in having a SENSE OF PURPOSE and a belief in a bright future, including goal direction, educational aspirations, achievement motivation, persistence, hopefulness, optimism, and spiritual connectedness.

From this research on resilience, from the literature on school effectiveness (Comer, 1984; Edmonds, 1986; Rutter et al., 1979), and from a rich body of ethnographic studies in which we hear the voices of youth, families, and teachers explaining their successes and failures (Heath & McLaughlin, 1993; Weis & Fine, 1993), a clear picture emerges of those characteristics of the family, school, and community environments that may alter or even reverse expected negative outcomes and enable individuals to circumvent life stressors and manifest resilience despite risk. These "protective factors" or "protective processes" can be grouped into three major categories: caring and supportive relationships, positive and high expectations, and opportunities for meaningful participation.

# CARING RELATIONSHIPS

The presence of at least one caring person--someone who conveys an attitude of compassion, who understands that no matter how awful a child's behavior, the child is doing the best he or she can given his or her experience--provides support for healthy development and learning. Werner and Smith's (1989) study, covering more than 40 years, found that, among the most frequently encountered positive role models in the lives of resilient children, outside of the family circle, was a favorite teacher who was not just an instructor for academic skills for the youngsters but also a confidant and positive model for personal identification. Furthermore, as the research of Noddings (1988) has articulated, a caring relationship with a teacher gives youth the motivation for wanting to succeed: "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....It is obvious that children will work harder and do things...for people they love and trust." Even beyond the teacher-student relationship, creating a schoolwide ethos of caring creates the opportunities for caring student-to-student, teacher-to-teacher, and teacher-to-parent relationships. An ethic of caring is obviously not a "program" or "strategy" per se, but rather a way of being in the world, a way of relating to youth, their families, and each other that conveys compassion, understanding, respect, and interest. It is also the wellspring from which flow the two other protective factors.

# HIGH EXPECTATIONS

Research has indicated that schools that establish high expectations for all youth--and give them the support necessary to achieve them--have high rates of academic success. They also have lower rates of problem behaviors such as dropping out, drug abuse, teen pregnancy, and delinquency than other schools (Rutter et al., 1979). The conveying of positive and high expectations in a classroom and school occurs at several levels. The most obvious and powerful is at the relationship level in which the teacher and other school staff communicate the message that the student has everything he or she needs to be successful. As Tracy Kidder (1990) writes, "For children who are used to thinking of themselves as stupid or not worth talking to...a good teacher can provide an astonishing revelation. A good teacher can give a child at least a chance to feel, She thinks I'm worth something; maybe I am'." Through relationships that convey high expectations, students learn to believe in themselves and in their futures, developing the critical resilience traits of self-esteem, self-efficacy, autonomy, and optimism. Schools also communicate expectations in the way they are structured and organized. The curriculum that supports resilience respects the way humans learn. Such a curriculum is thematic, experiential, challenging, comprehensive, and inclusive of multiple perspectives--especially those of silenced groups. Instruction that supports resilience focuses on a broad range of learning styles; builds from perceptions of student strengths, interests, and experience; and is participatory and facilitative, creating ongoing opportunities for self-reflection, critical inquiry, problem solving, and dialogue. Grouping practices that support resilience promote heterogeneity and

inclusion, cooperation, shared responsibility, and a sense of belonging. And, lastly, evaluation that supports resilience focuses on multiple intelligences, utilizes authentic assessments, and fosters self-reflection.

# OPPORTUNITIES FOR PARTICIPATION

Providing youth with opportunities for meaningful involvement and responsibility within the school is a natural outcome in schools that have high expectations. Participation, like caring and respect, is a fundamental human need. Several educational reformers believe that when schools ignore these basic needs of both students and teachers, schools become alienating places (Sarason, 1990). On the other hand, certain practices provide youth with opportunities to give their gifts back to the school community and do indeed foster all the traits of resilience. These practices include asking questions that encourage critical thinking and dialogue (especially around current social issues), making learning more hands-on, involving students in curriculum planning, using participatory evaluation strategies, letting students create the governing rules of the classroom, and employing cooperative approaches (such as cooperative learning, peer helping, cross-age mentoring, and community service).

# CONCLUSION

Along with other educational research, research on resilience gives educators a blueprint for creating schools where all students can thrive socially and academically. Research suggests that when schools are places where the basic human needs for support, respect, and belonging are met, motivation for learning is fostered. Reciprocal caring, respectful, and participatory relationships are the critical determining factors in whether a student learns; whether parents become and stay involved in the school; whether a program or strategy is effective; whether an educational change is sustained; and, ultimately, whether a youth feels he or she has a place in this society. When a school redefines its culture by building a vision and commitment on the part of the whole school community that is based on these three critical factors of resilience, it has the power to serve as a "protective shield" for all students and a beacon of light for youth from troubled homes and impoverished communities.

# FOR MORE INFORMATION

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