

The Resiliency Route to Academic Success*

by

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Resilience is the capacity to successfully adapt to negative life events. The Resiliency Route to Academic Success refers to a framework of four basic steps for increasing academic success and positive life outcomes for students. This framework is derived from the intersecting evidence from resiliency research and research on what students need to best learn (Henderson & Milstein, 2003), and can be used by all educators to help students facing academic challenges. The research indicates that resilient students do well in school despite adversity, and that students thrive in an educational environment imbued with genuine caring and concern from adults that have high expectations for student success and who promote student empowerment. School counselors have the background, training, and skills to teach, model, and encourage behaviors that create these resiliency-building environments in which students can best learn. School counselors are also the natural leaders to convince other educators of the power of resiliency and to teach them how to use the resiliency-building techniques described below.

Four Basic Steps

Step 1: Always communicate The Resiliency Attitude of student success

Fostering success in the face of adversity begins with an attitude of caring and support, expressed verbally and nonverbally, that communicates, “I see what is *right* with you, no matter what you have done in the past, no matter what problems you currently face. Your strengths are more powerful than your ‘risks.’ Whatever risks, problems, and adversity you are facing are steps on the road to bouncing back—they are not the end of the road!” Some of the things you can do to demonstrate a resilient attitude include:

- listening with compassion;
- validating the pain of a student’s problems while conveying his or her ability to overcome them; and
- providing thoughtful and nurturing gestures.

Together, these strategies show children that you care, and provide the emotional support that experts agree is an underestimated key ingredient for academic success.

Step 2: Use strengths to overcome problems or weaknesses

Wolin and Wolin (1993) discuss the power of “alternate mirrors” as motivators of behavioral change in their research on youth struggling with school failure and other problem behaviors. As children grow up, they develop an internal self-concept based on the mirroring, or reflection, of themselves that they perceive from others in their environment. Ideally, children will get mirroring messages that communicate love, being wanted, and the important place of the child in the family. However, many children experience abuse, abandonment, and neglect; these children develop an internal self-concept that increases their chance of failure. This negative self-concept is realized in such self-messages as “I am not loveable,” “I am not wanted,” or “I am bad.” The most potent force for diminishing the psychological and behavioral effects of these messages is contact with a person who becomes an alternate or believing mirror.

Example strategies include:

- pointing out to the student his or her strengths, positive qualities, and talents;
- letting the student know that he or she is wanted and important; and
- increasing positive experiences by focusing on and adding to the student’s strengths and environmental supports. For example, if a student writes poetry, you might praise his or her creativity and suggest he or she submit a poem to the school paper or other literary source.

Implementing these strategies helps shift the balance of experience from negative to positive: The power of the risks and problems are reduced and the student’s strengths—including talents, competencies, resiliency characteristics, and environmental supports—grow.

Personal Resiliency Builders

Everyone has two to four qualities they use to bounce back from adversity, natural strengths that can contribute to their personal resiliency. Refer to the list below, and ask students you are trying to help become successful, “What qualities do you use most often when faced with a challenge or problem?” Then ask, “How can you use these same qualities to overcome your current life challenges?”

- *Relationships*– Forms positive relationships, makes friends, can be a friend
- *Service*– Gives of self in service to others and/or a cause
- *Life Skills*– Uses good decision making, assertiveness, and impulse control
- *Humor*– Has a good sense of humor
- *Inner Direction*– Bases choices/decisions on internal evaluation (internal locus of control)
- *Perceptiveness*– Understands people and situations
- *Independence*– Distances self from unhealthy people and situations/autonomy
- *Positive View of Personal Future*– Expects a positive future
- *Flexibility*– Adjusts to change; can bend as necessary to positively cope with situations
- *Love of Learning*– Has capacity for and connection to learning
- *Self-Motivation*– Exhibits internal initiative and positive motivation from within
- *Competence*– Is “good at something”/personal competence
- *Self-Worth*– Has feelings of self-worth and self-confidence
- *Spirituality*– Has faith in something greater than self
- *Perseverance*– Keeps on despite difficulty; doesn’t give up
- *Creativity*– Expresses self through artistic endeavor

(Adapted from Henderson & Milstein, 2003)

Step 3: Build resiliency-fostering conditions around each student

The next step is to focus on building resiliency-fostering environmental conditions around each student. This step can occur simultaneously with the first two. Resiliency researchers speculate that the following six conditions are actually *basic human needs*, thereby explaining why increasing these six elements in a person’s life greatly improves the chances that he or she will successfully overcome whatever challenges—including academic—are being faced. No child can have too many protective factors, and most today have far too few.

Resiliency-Fostering Conditions

- *Provide caring and support.* Provide unconditional positive regard and encouragement. Caring is probably the most important tool for fostering resilience, but it does not necessarily have to come from family members. Optimally, every child should have several adults he or she can turn to for help.

- *Set and communicate high expectations.* Communicating high expectations appears consistently in both the resiliency literature and in the research on academic success (Henderson & Milstein, 2003). It is important to keep in mind, however, that expectations must be both high and *realistic* to be effective motivators of behavior.
- *Provide opportunities for meaningful participation.* Providing opportunities for problem solving, decision making, planning, goal setting, and helping others can be a powerful buffer against negative life experiences and involves adults sharing power in real ways with children.
- *Increase prosocial bonding.* Increase the connections between young people and positive peers and adults, and support young people’s involvement in prosocial activities such as sports, art, music, drama, community and/or school service, and reading and other learning activities.
- *Set clear and consistent boundaries.* This strategy involves the development and consistent implementation of family rules and norms, school policies and procedures, and community laws and norms. Behavioral and academic expectations should be developed with input from young people, clearly communicated (in writing is ideal), and coupled with appropriate consequences that are consistently enforced.
- *Teach “life skills.”* Such skills include cooperation, healthy conflict resolution, resistance (to peer pressure) and assertiveness skills, communication skills, problem solving and decision making, and healthy stress management. When these skills are adequately taught and reinforced, they help young people successfully face adolescent challenges such as smoking, drinking alcohol, and other drug use (Griffin, Botvin, Nichols, & Doyle, 2003), all of which are detriments to academic success.

Step 4: Never give up!

Resiliency ebbs and flows throughout an individual’s life. Many survivors of difficult childhood circumstances cite persistence by caring people as crucial to their ability to both become resilient and maintain their resiliency. Leslie Krug’s story is a good example of the value of “never giving up.” At 17, Leslie was looking forward to high-school graduation. However, Leslie went through ninth grade in a traditional high school three times before succeeding on the fourth try in an alternative school. She credits her mother as a major contributor to her resilience, as well as the alternative school her mother finally found for her that was operated based on the framework outlined here. Leslie not only made it through ninth grade in an environment of caring, high expectations, and positive mirroring in the alternative school; she also decided to go on to community college and become a small-business owner (Henderson, Benard, & Sharp-Light, 1999).

*This guide is adapted from a presentation by the author at the February 2003 National Invitational Conference, “The Role of School Counselors in Closing the Gap.” Cosponsored by the Minority Student Achievement Network (MSAN), the Network for Equity in Student Achievement (NESA), and the Laboratory for Student Success (LSS), the conference brought together school counselors, teachers, superintendents, directors of school counseling, principals, social workers, and other education professionals to discuss the critical role of school counselors in standards-based school reform.

So you'd like to foster resilience...?

Where should a counselor, teacher, or other caring adult begin in making use of this information? Start wherever there is the greatest need and/or wherever it is possible to start. Often, one action will embody many resiliency-fostering elements. It is important to recognize that there is no way to know just how many protective factors are needed by any one individual to assure a resilient outcome. Most resilient children who have been studied did not have protective factors in their family, school, *and* community environments; some have only a few in just a few places. So, start wherever possible, based on an assessment of what would help an individual child the most and on available resources. Developing a Resiliency Chart may help you brainstorm ideas.

The Resiliency Chart

For each student, draw a T-chart. On the left side of the chart, list all the concerns, internal (attitudes/behaviors) and external (environmental risks/stressors), that you know about the student. Limit your list to the most pressing problems. On the right side, list positives within the student (e.g., attitudes, behaviors, talents, capabilities, positive interests) and within their environment (e.g., people, places, organizations, or structures that provide positive interaction and support for the student). Referring to the resiliency protective factors and the Personal Resiliency Builders can help you with this strength-identification process. One key question that may help you brainstorm strengths is “How does this student do as well as he or she does?” In other words, even though he or she has problems, what keeps those problems from being even more serious and numerous?

A resiliency orientation is something all educators (and all caring adults), can convey to children through an attitude of optimism and encouragement, a focus on strengths and positive mirroring, a commitment to weaving resiliency-fostering elements into children’s lives, and persistence in these approaches.

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