Strategies for helping students build their resilience

School resources

While resilience varies at different ages and developmental stages and across different contexts, it is not something that children are born with but rather a developmental process that is influenced by children's experiences and relationships. This means that resilience can be learned and developed. Teaching students how to make productive choices and encouraging them to do so can support students' resilience. Developing a repertoire of productive coping strategies that can be flexibly employed in varying situations is key.

Teaching resilience

One way to build resilience is to teach children not to exaggerate problems or jump to conclusions but to **find the value in obstacles** that arise. Teachers can model this by pointing out mistakes they make in the classroom and how they learn from their own mistakes. By finding positive meaning in obstacles, teachers can help students to normalise stressful events. It is also beneficial to help students to see the situational factors at play rather than attributing failures to their own personal deficiencies. For example, when a student doesn't do well on a test, attributing their grade to how much they studied rather than an innate level of intelligence is more likely to encourage resilience. Students with lower academic outcomes tend to misperceive their intelligence as low, but effort attributions are generally far more accurate in explaining poorer academic performance than trait attributions.

Another way to support the development of resilience is to model and encourage **positive self-talk and humour**. Greater levels of humour are associated with more positive self-concept, higher levels of self-esteem, and more positive responses to both positive and negative life events. Ask children 'What are you saying to yourself?' and 'What are you thinking inside your head?' Then, if necessary, help them to reframe these thoughts. Teach students to think 'What's wrong with this situation?' rather than 'What's wrong with me?' or 'Why me?'

Teachers can also build resilience in their students by encouraging them to check their initial response to a problem to ensure that they have a **realistic perception of the issue**. You might ask them to consider who is actually responsible, and how much responsibility is really theirs. Help them come to realise that most stresses are not completely the result of one person's failings or actions. You might also ask them to consider if the issue is going to last forever – can they see an end to the stress? Most stresses are temporary. Finally, ask them whether the stress is going to affect everything in their life, or can they identify areas that are not affected? It is easier to bounce back when students see that a problem only affects a small part of their lives.

Another strategy for developing resilience is to teach students to take the initiative in dealing with problems by **planning for positive outcomes**. Develop a framework for problem solving involving stages such as identifying the problem, analysing the cause or contributing factors, determining who might be able to help, and seeking other ways to think about the problem that invite different solutions. Support resourcefulness by providing students with opportunities for problem solving and organising their own learning, and develop students' skills in creative problem solving and decision making.

Another important step in building resilience is ensuring that students know how to **reach out to adults or friends** if they have a problem or are experiencing difficult emotions. Teach them how to tell someone how they are feeling, and to reach out to ask for support from others when they need it.

It is also beneficial to teach students ways to **calm themselves down** when they are stressed and help them identify situations that make them feel distressed, anxious, or angry. Then you can talk about ways of dealing with these feelings and identifying these feelings in other people, as being able to control one's feelings and behaviour is an important part of resilience. Provide opportunities for students to recognise and manage their own emotions, and to recognise and respond with empathy to the emotions of others. For instance, students might practise naming and talking about emotions with others. Being able to intuit others' feelings in order to get along well with others provides a sense of social support necessary for feeling resilient.

Finally, research shows that students who adopt a growth mindset are more likely to persist with difficult tasks, maintain high levels of effort and seek future challenges. When students are taught that their brains are malleable and can develop, and shown ways to improve their academic skills, there can be striking effects on resilience. In addition, students who are taught and believe that academic skills can be developed, rather than believing the academic skills are fixed and cannot be improved, show higher achievement.

Creating an environment in which resilience can flourish

Resilience develops within **relationships that promote feelings of security, self-efficacy and agency**. This requires classrooms with high expectations for learning, in which student responses are valued and where students participate in setting goals and managing their learning. Capitalise on strong relationships with your students to promote their development of self-worth and encourage them to express an interest in life, take up new opportunities and interact with others. Students then have a sense of belonging and involvement which provides them with a protective shield against the difficulties that life throws at them. Also, when students' developing sense of agency and self-efficacy is supported, students gain confidence in their ideas, their understanding of challenges and what to do to address those challenges.

Experiences that challenge students' feelings of safety and competence give students an **opportunity to respond with successful coping behaviours** and, as a result, increase their levels of resilience and adaptability. This has to be carefully managed, however, as inappropriate or overwhelming challenge can lead to psychological distress, and it is important to ensure that the classroom environment is seen by all students as a secure, inclusive environment in which it is safe to take risks. Students might need to be guided to see these difficult situations as opportunities to practise and develop coping responses. Challenges that involve connections with the community and self-set challenges can be other useful avenues for prompting skills of resilience.

It is important to create a classroom environment in which **reflection and feedback-seeking** are promoted and encouraged. Reflection, debriefing and learning from past experiences are important for developing resilience. Reflection can also help students develop confidence and overcome their fear of making mistakes. Seeking feedback also helps students to navigate difficult situations and make adaptations that help them perform well.

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PREPARED FOR THE EDUCATION HUB BY

Dr Vicki Hargraves

Vicki is a teacher, mother, writer, and researcher. She recently completed her PhD using philosophy to explore creative approaches to understanding early childhood education. She is inspired by the wealth of educational research that is available and is passionate about making this available and useful for teachers.