

5 Ways to Build Resilience in Students

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Social & Emotional Learning (SEL)

Students need the tools to deal with adversity. Here's how teachers can help.

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March 26, 2021

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For many children, the past year brought disruption on a grand scale, with the pandemic affecting virtually every aspect of their daily lives. And while “caregivers can’t always alter children’s circumstances or shield them from discomfort, they can offer a more enduring gift: tools to manage adversity,” writes therapist and school counselor [Phyllis L. Fagell](#) for *The Washington Post*.



But it’s clear that educators also play an essential role in helping children develop the determination and ability to persevere through difficult circumstances in school and life—this year, and anytime.

When educators help students “cultivate an approach to life that views obstacles as a critical part of success, we help them develop resilience,” writes [Marilyn Price-Mitchell](#), a developmental psychologist and author. “Resilience is not a genetic trait. It is derived from the ways that children learn to think and act when faced with obstacles large and small.” When the adults in children’s lives—caregivers, teachers, coaches—help young people develop resilience, it helps them “emerge from challenging experiences with a positive sense of themselves and their futures,” says Price-Mitchell.

It’s a skill that takes practice. “Resilience works like a muscle we can build through effort and repetition, and we want to keep our muscles strong and flexible so we can think of many ways to solve a problem,” Mary Alvord, a psychologist and author, tells Fagell. “At the core, resilience is the belief that while you can't control everything in your life, there are many aspects you can control, including your attitude.”

Here are five strategies, some recommended by Fagell and a few sourced from our *Edutopia* content, for helping students build the vital capacity for resilience.

Set Brave Goals

A big part of developing resilience involves being able to identify personal goals, and then being able to “tolerate the discomfort that’s creating resistance toward that goal,” psychologist Ryan C.T. DeLapp tells Fagell. This year, a brave goal might involve asking students to contemplate the camera-on/camera-off dilemma, exploring how it impacts their personal and academic growth. “Is not being on camera interfering with your academics, or likely to make it harder for you to be visual socially when the pandemic ends?” asks DeLapp. “That represents an opportunity for a brave goal.”

Many educators use a SMART framework to help students set personal goals that are: specific; measurable; attainable; relevant; and timely. “It’s not easy to write SMART goals,” writes Maurice J. Elias, a professor in the psychology department at Rutgers University. “This skill takes time to develop, and it’s especially important to have in place for students at the secondary level.”

A vague goal, Elias writes, might look like this: “I will do better on my next report card.” But a more productive goal—one that’s a good mix of ambitious yet achievable—might look like this: “In the next marking period, I will take careful notes and review them at least two days before tests and quizzes so that I can ask the teacher questions about what I don’t understand. I will do my math homework before I do things with friends, and when I hand it in, I will ask the teacher about anything I am not sure about. When I get anything wrong, I will make sure to ask the teacher, or one of my classmates how they got the right answer.”

Once a child meets a goal, it’s especially important to celebrate the achievement, notes DeLapp. “Make time to reflect on progress toward their brave goal, and express gratitude and excitement when they meet them,” Fagell advises.

Model Learning from Mistakes

Learning from failure “is paramount to becoming a resilient young person,” writes Price-Mitchell. Teachers can help by creating a classroom where “failure, setbacks, and disappointment are an expected and honored part of learning,” where students are “praised for their hard work, perseverance, and grit, not just for grades and easy successes,” and where they are held accountable for producing work about which they feel “ownership and internal reward.”

Consider creating a classroom bulletin board where, in addition to showcasing students' achievements, "students can brag about their biggest mistakes and what they learned from them," wrote educational consultant and author, Richard Curwin. "Be sure to tell the class about your own mistakes, especially if they are funny, and what you learned from them," wrote Curwin, who died in 2018. Give students opportunities to correct mistakes and resubmit work and be sure to recognize when their work improves because "nothing shows learning from mistakes more than improvement," Curwin noted.

Or you can explicitly label some activities "rough-draft thinking" suggest math professor Amanda Jansen and her co-authors in a 2017 study, giving students "permission to ask questions, make mistakes, and then revise without the stifling prospect of failure."

Encourage Responsible Risks

High school special education teacher Daniel Vollrath likens resilience to a stress ball. "A stress ball is resilient because it springs back to its original shape after being squeezed," Vollrath writes. "Likewise, when students experience stress or frustration, we can think of that as pressure on them that they need to spring back from. The hope in presenting them with strategies to build resilience is that those strategies will ease the frustration and help them get back into optimal and productive focus for learning."

One way to foster resilience is to recognize and compliment students when they take responsible risks and challenge themselves—even and maybe especially when they don't achieve the desired results. For example, speaking up to answer a question during a Zoom class, even if the answer is incorrect, or "stumbling on words while reading out loud," writes Vollrath. "These are opportunities to build confidence, and risk-taking, and most importantly, to keep a resilient momentum going forward while in a safe space."

Label Difficult Emotions

Recognizing and naming emotions, from elementary school through high school, can help students "become self-aware and begin to manage their own emotional states effectively—psychologists call this labeling," writes Jorge Valenzuela, an education coach and adjunct professor at Old Dominion University. Once students learn to notice, name, and interpret their emotions, they are better prepared to make rational decisions and manage disorienting or disruptive emotions in their lives—critical elements of resilience.

A good place to start in the classroom is with quick daily emotional check-ins. Valenzuela lays the groundwork for these at the beginning of the year, using Plutchik's Wheel of Emotions to teach students the words they can use to describe the emotions they're feeling—with varying degrees of complexity based on grade level. "I find that [the emotion wheel] helps them categorize their emotions and their responses to those emotions," Valenzuela writes. "Additionally, students can recognize that other emotions are an amalgamation of the eight basic emotions or are derived from one or more of them. This is a very powerful realization for them—it serves to help them identify emotional triggers and begin planning to respond with good self-management strategies."

Write and Talk About Setbacks and Human Resilience

In middle and high school, writing assignments that focus on "sources of personal strength" can help kids explore different ways to build resilience, writes Price-Mitchell, who provides a few prompts to get started: "Write about a person who supported you during a particularly stressful or traumatic time. How did they help you overcome this challenge? What did you learn about yourself?" Another idea: "Write about a time in your life when you had to cope with a difficult situation. What helped and hindered you as you overcame this challenge? What learning did you take away that will help you in the future?"

But the topic of resilience isn't bound to one class—ELA, for example—it's relevant across the curriculum. "Opportunities abound to connect resilience with personal success, achievement, and positive social change," Price-Mitchell notes. "Expand discussions about political leaders, scientists, literary figures, innovators, and inventors beyond what they accomplished to the personal strengths they possess, and the hardships they endured and overcame to reach their goals. Help students learn to see themselves and their own strengths through these success stories."