

RESILIENCE EDUCATION

The term 'resilience' can mean different things across various disciplines.

"In physics, resilience describes the process by which other objects revert to their original shape after being bent or stretched. In medicine, it refers to the ability of individual patients to recover from injury or illness."

Clarke & Nicholson, 2010

"Resilience is the fine art of being able to bunjy jump through life. The pitfalls are still there but is as if you have an elasticized rope around your middle that helps you to bounce back from hard times."

Fuller, 2011

"... the inherent and nurtured capacity of individuals to deal with life's stresses in ways that enable them to lead healthy and fulfilled lives."

Howard & Johnson, 1999

Whatever the discipline, the recurring theme linked to resilience is the 'ability to bounce back'. Research has shown that some people appear to be more resilient than others, simply by their very nature. These people are less fazed by setbacks than others and clearly show a greater ability to 'bounce back', no matter what life throws at them.

Therefore it is important to try to make our young people as resilient as possible, as this will hopefully help to protect them against the stresses and adverse situations that they will encounter as they go through life. It would be impossible to 'inoculate' them against these type of situations but if we can give them the ability to 'bounce back' when they do encounter problems, we are arming them in the best way possible.

So what is resilience education and how does it apply to alcohol and other drugs?

"Resilience education gives children and young people the opportunity to develop a range of social and emotional skills that can influence the way they make choices and decisions in drug-related situations."

SDERA, 2011

Resilience education acknowledges that some people have certain 'protective factors' 'built in'. These are factors in a person's life that promote well-being and can either be qualities that are inherent in either the individual themselves or their environment. Resilience education attempts to strengthen the existing qualities of the young person and improve the environmental factors they are exposed to so as to assist them to make positive decisions across a range of areas, including alcohol and other drugs.

Unfortunately, many drug education programs have tended to be delivered in an attempt to scare young people, i.e., fear arousal. This strategy has not proven successful for many young people and, in fact, some studies have shown that they can have the reverse effect. These programs also discourage children's quest for knowledge and limit the opportunity for critical decision-making.

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“Resilience Drug Education balances an environment that is supportive of youth with a directed focus on the specific protective factors and appropriate information that allow for lifelong thriving.”

Brown, 2004

It is important to note that while there is little evidence to suggest that resilience-based prevention programs will reduce the rate of experimentation with alcohol and other drugs, the research does indicate that the more resilient young people are, the less likely they are to get into serious trouble with a range of high-risk behaviours, including frequent or heavy alcohol or other drug use.

Listed below are just some of the individual protective factors that have been identified:

- ability to connect
- problem solving/coping skills
- easy temperament
- realistic appraisal of the environment
- capacity for humour
- sense of purpose or mission in life
- intelligence
- sense of personal capacity
- capacity for empathy
- capacity to self monitor
- ability to learn from mistakes
- have hobbies/creative interests/talents
- spiritual beliefs

Of course, there is little or nothing that anyone can do to make a child have many of these qualities – with the exception of a few, they either do or they don't. However, in order to build a child's resilience, if a parent, a teacher or other adult identifies one or more of these qualities in a young person, it is important to nurture that quality as best they can. In doing so, they will be assisting to build a more resilient child.

For teachers this is not an extra subject or extra work – this is simply being a good teacher and what most do every day in the classroom.

Although we can do little to influence whether a child has any of these individual protective factors or not, both parents and teachers play a vital role in the development of a range of environmental protective factors. Here are just some that have been identified:

- a warm positive relationship with an adult (e.g., parent or teacher)
- high (but not unrealistic) parental expectations
- having family responsibilities
- family traditions/rituals
- good-enough parenting and supervision
- a caring and supportive school environment
- positive community norms
- opportunities for involvement
- access to resources (people or things)
- extended family support

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“Through a caring, connected relationship, the teachable moment emerges when a young person’s interest or strength is identified as a learning opportunity.”

“As emotional ties of connectedness between youth and adult occur, information provided during the teachable moment is more likely to be accepted and become deeply learned not because of the information per se, but because of its context, the caring process.”

Brown, 2004

By nurturing and strengthening the individual protective factors of our children and ensuring that we continue to provide a range of positive environmental factors for them, we increase the chance of making them more resilient and give them a greater chance of bouncing back when they are faced with future challenges.

References

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