

How to help students improve their resilience

All students will experience difficult situations at some point in their educational career, both academic and social. For children in the later years of primary school, for example, common sources of stress are teasing and bullying, conflict with teachers or parents, competition with peers, homework, tests and class presentations, and the transition to high school.

Resilience is the capacity to adapt well when faced with adversity or stress. Resilience helps students stave off potential negative psychological effects of challenging experiences. Resilience involves more than continuing to persist despite difficulty. Resilient students interpret academic or social challenges in a positive way (such as increasing effort, developing new strategies, or practising conflict resolution).

There are several critical abilities associated with resilience, including

- **emotional regulation** (the ability to keep calm and express emotions in a way that helps the situation)
- **impulse control** (making a conscious choice whether to act on a desire to take action, and the ability to delay gratification and persevere)
- **causal analysis** (to analyse problems and identify causes accurately)
- **empathy** (the ability to understand the feelings and needs of another person)
- **realistic optimism** (keeping a positive outlook without denying reality)
- **self-efficacy** (belief in one's ability to solve problems and handle stress)
- **opportunity seeking** (the ability to take new opportunities and reach out to others)

Resilient people also display courage and motivation to face problems and difficulties accurately (rather than denying or exaggerating them) and they maintain a positive mindset and confidence to persevere. In general, students with higher resilience tend to have more positive outcomes, including better psychological well-being, higher self-efficacy, and less problem behaviour. Resilience is identified as one of the NZ Curriculum's key competencies for "managing self".

Resilience fluctuates at different ages and developmental stages, and also varies across different contexts. Resilience is not a character trait that children are born with, but is a developmental process mostly influenced by children's experiences and relationships. This means that psychological resilience can be learned and developed.

Resilient mindsets

Resilience (like its opposite, vulnerability) is produced as a consequence of a particular way of interpreting problems (rather than just the presence of social or academic adversity). Resilience is significantly influenced by people's mindsets — their patterns for interpreting events, including why they happen, who is to blame for the difficulty, and what impact a problem will have. In addition, people's thinking about the permanence of the problem and its pervasiveness across various aspects of their life affects their ability for resilience.

Behaviours that threaten resilience include: jumping to conclusions, personalising issues, making assumptions about what others know or think, allowing emotions to dominate reasoning, over-generalising, magnifying the negative features or minimising the positive features of a situation, and catastrophising or exaggerating the likelihood or extent of negative outcomes.

Coping strategies

Key to resilience is the use of positive coping strategies that promote internal well-being in times of stress, risk and adversity. Coping strategies involve implementing a wide set of skills and responses to manage external demands perceived as challenging or conditions perceived as adverse.

Coping strategies can be **problem-focused**, where individuals seek to address the source of the issue and implement actions aimed at a solution. Or coping strategies can be **emotion-focused**, regulating internal processes; for example, through processing, acknowledging, expressing and understanding emotions. (However, be wary of students overly focusing on negative emotional responses, as this can potentially undermine the development of resilience.)

Not all coping strategies are equally effective, nor do they all promote the development of resilience. Some coping strategies, such as ignoring the problem, worrying or passively accepting the situation, undermine student resilience. However, coping strategies such as positive reinterpretation of the problem, and problem solving are resilience-enhancing.

Therefore teaching students about productive choices and methods of coping and encouraging them to use them can have beneficial outcomes for resiliency. Developing a repertoire of productive coping strategies which can be flexibly employed in different situations is key.

Resilience-enhancing	
Positive reinterpretation	Reinterpreting a stressful event in positive terms
Humour	Finding aspects to laugh at in order to minimise stress
Active coping	Initiating direct action to mitigate the stress
Planning	Selecting a series steps to best handle the problem
Seeking help and social support	Seeking advice, assistance or information, moral support, empathy or understanding
Resilience-undermining	
Focus on, and venting, emotions	Focusing on what is distressing or upsetting and releasing those feelings
Mental disengagement	Choosing activities which distract the student from thinking about the stress
Behavioural disengagement	Reducing effort applied to dealing with the stressful event
Denial	Denying or acting as though the stressor isn't real
Acceptance	Accepting the reality of a situation

Resilience teaching tips

Positive reinterpretation and humour

- Teach children not to exaggerate problems or jump to conclusions but to look on the bright side of things and laugh at their mistakes. Find positive meaning in obstacles. Help students to normalise, rather than personalise or catastrophise, stressful events.
- Practise using positive self-talk using scripts, and practise using humour. Greater levels of humour are associated with more positive self-concept and 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?”, and if necessary, help them to reframe these thoughts. Teach students to think “What’s wrong with this situation?”, not “What’s wrong with me?” or “Why me?”.
- Encourage students to check their initial response to a problem, to ensure they have a realistic perception of the issues. 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. 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 what areas are not affected? It is easier to bounce back when students see that a problem only affects part of their lives.

Planning and active coping

- Teach students ways to calm themselves down when stressed, and plan for positive outcomes.
- Teach students how to take the initiative in dealing with problems. 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. Develop students’ skills in creative problem solving and decision making.

Help-seeking and self-disclosure skills

- Ensure students know who to talk to 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.
- Provide opportunities for students to recognise and manage their own emotions, and to recognise and respond with empathy to the emotions of others.
- Practise naming and talking about emotions with others.
- Help students identify situations that make them feel distressed, anxious or angry, and talk about ways of dealing with these feelings and identifying these feelings in other people. Being able to control one’s feelings and behaviour is a big part of resilience. Also being able to intuit others’ feelings in order to get along well with others provides a sense of social support necessary for feeling resilient.

Other important factors that support resiliency

Strong relationships that foster self-efficacy and agency

Resilience develops within relationships that promote feelings of security, self-efficacy and hopefulness. 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 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.

Ensure that students behave fairly and thoughtfully so that everyone can experience a psychologically safe classroom where all students support each other. Bonding and commitment to school also support academic resilience. Resiliency is more like to develop in inclusive environments where every student is treated with unconditional positive regard. Caring relationships between teachers and students promote resilience and positive adaptability. Peer friendships and support are powerful protective factors for students, promoting academic, behavioural and psychological resilience. Encourage co-operative learning experiences in which students can strengthen relationships among each other.

Opportunities for self-determination

Resilience is related to students' beliefs that they have the ability to influence their environment. Resilient students are high in autonomy and self-efficacy, and thus experience feelings of confidence and believe that things will work out. A sense of personal control gives students an advantage in making adaptations when faced with difficulty and can moderate the effect of adversity on well-being.

Challenge-based resiliency activities

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. 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 of prompting skills of resilience.

Student reflection and feedback seeking

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.

Growth mindsets

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.

Changing students' mindsets can increase resilience without any accompanying reduction in the adversities experienced in school. For example, rather than feeling 'stupid' in experiencing challenge, students with a growth mindset see challenges as opportunities to get smarter. Rather than feeling stressed by experiences of exclusion, students with a growth mindset believe that there is the potential for change in themselves or those that exclude them. When they hold a belief that they and their peers are not likely to change, students are more vulnerable to these adversities, whereas an emphasis on the potential for change can substantially transform the meaning of such events and, over time, lead to long-term differences in both stress and academic achievement.

Teaching resilience to children under six

Resilience characteristics in early childhood includes cognitive understandings about working within rules, controlling impulses and finding alternative ways to solve problems. Resilient children are developing understanding of feelings and are able to put them into words, and talk to others about things that are frightening or distressing. They are able to seek help when needed and assert the rights and responsibilities of themselves and others.

- Offer opportunities for well-developed make-believe play that helps children develop the intentional and self-regulatory behaviour that are important in the developing coping abilities.
- Offer opportunities for children to experience true mastery. Offer choices. Allow children to take measured risks, and identify and reinforce competence by highlighting small accomplishments ("You remembered to ride your bike in the right direction so you didn't bump into people") that help children own their successes.
- Demonstrate 'positivity'. Provide children with unconditional love, offer guidance in identifying positive parts of a situation. Verbalise positive thoughts and demonstrate calming and focusing strategies.