

SELF-WORTH, RESILIENCE AND HOPE: THE SEARCH FOR ISLANDS OF COMPETENCE

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In my workshops I often ask the audience how many have ever taken a course titled, "Abnormal Psychology." Many, many hands are raised. When I next ask how many have ever had a course titled, "Resilience in Children," at most one or two hands go up. This is true even when the audience is composed primarily of educators and/or mental health professionals, many of whom have earned advanced degrees in teaching and counseling children.

I often wonder how we can effectively raise or work with youngsters without understanding the variables that contribute to resilience in children. If I were designing a training program for educators, mental health professionals, and other professionals who work with children (and I might add for parents as well), I would require a course titled, "Resilience", which would focus on answering the following question: "What factors help children to overcome adversity and beat the heavy odds against them?" I believe that in examining this question, we would learn a great deal about parenting, teaching, and caring for children.

Domains Influencing Resilience

In the past decade there has been increased interest in what helps children, including many with school difficulties, to deal with hardship and difficult situations and become more resilient. Clinicians and researchers have noted that three interrelated domains influence the presence of resilience, namely, the child, the family, and the larger social environment.

A. The Characteristics of the Child

Resilient children have often been found to have "easy" temperaments from birth, eliciting more positive responses from their caregivers. In addition, they appear to have more advanced problem-solving and decision-making skills, cognitive-integrative abilities, and more adaptive coping strategies. Most importantly, resilient children maintain a high level of self-esteem, a realistic sense of personal control, and a feeling of hope. Given this strong relationship between self esteem and resilience, attention must be given to those interventions that foster high self-esteem.

B. The Family Climate

Not surprisingly, resilient children are more likely to come from home environments characterized by warmth, affection, emotional support, and clear-cut and reasonable guidelines, structure, and limits. If parents are not able to provide this kind of positive atmosphere, other family members can serve this function.

C. The Extended Social Environment

Extended family members, friends, teachers, and community groups and agencies can provide support that is lacking at home. As Emmy Werner, a renowned researcher in the area of resilience, has noted, "Most of all, self-esteem and self-efficacy were promoted through supportive relationships. The resilient youngsters in our study all had at least one person in their lives who accepted them unconditionally, regardless of temperamental idiosyncrasies, physical attractiveness, or intelligence."

Schools have especially been highlighted as institutions that can offer children experiences that reinforce resilience. Psychologist Julius Segal has written, "From studies conducted around the world, researchers have distilled a number of factors that enable such children of misfortune to beat the heavy odds against them. One factor turns out to be the presence in their lives of a charismatic adult-- a person with whom they identify and from whom they gather strength. And in a surprising number of cases, that charismatic adult turns out to be a teacher."

Similarly, a Massachusetts Department of Education report about at-risk students observed, "Possibly the most critical element to success within school is a student developing a close and nurturing relationship with at least one caring adult. Students need to feel that there is someone within school whom they know, to whom they can turn, and who will act as an advocate for them."

We should never underestimate the impact that one caring adult can have on the lifetime of a child with school problems.

Strategies for Fostering Self-Esteem and Resilience

In my work I have focused on interventions to enhance self-esteem so that a child might become resilient. This is especially important for children with school difficulties since their self-esteem and confidence have often been weakened by numerous experiences of frustration and failure.

Self-esteem may be understood as including the feelings and thoughts that individuals have about their competence and worth, about their abilities to make a difference, to confront rather than retreat from challenges, to learn from both success and failure, and to treat themselves and others with respect.

If we are to help children develop self-esteem, we must focus not only on their areas of vulnerability, but also on their strengths. We must learn to identify and reinforce each child's strengths or what I call "islands of competence", so that a ripple effect may be created, motivating the child to venture forth and confront the tasks that have previously been difficult.

It is beyond the scope of this article to review in depth the various strategies that can be used to foster self-esteem. I have selected several to describe briefly below. (A more detailed description of these, and others, may be found in my book *The Self-Esteem Teacher*.)

A. Teaching Responsibility by Encouraging Contributions

If children are to develop a sense of achievement and pride, it is essential to provide them with ample opportunities for assuming responsibilities, especially those that help them to feel they are making a contribution to their home, school, or community environments. I have found that having at-risk children use their "islands of competence" to tutor younger children, or paint murals on the wall, or assist in the school office, or bring messages to the office, or go on Walks for Hunger, helps them to feel that they are making a difference, and serves to reinforce their motivation and self-esteem.

B. Teaching Decision-Making & Problem-Solving Skills & Reinforcing Self-Discipline

An essential ingredient of high self-esteem and resilience is the belief that one has control over what is transpiring in one's life. To acquire this attitude of ownership, children need opportunities to learn and apply decision-making and problem solving skills. This can be done by involving children in discussions of how best to solve problems, or having them decide which 6 or 8 problems on a homework sheet they can select to do, or enlisting their input in the development of rules and consequences that affect their lives, or asking them to do research on a particular project. These kinds of activities help children to feel empowered.

C. Offering Encouragement & Positive Feedback

Self-esteem and resilience are nurtured when caregivers communicate realistic appreciation to children and help them to feel special. By doing so, we become the "charismatic adults" in their lives. Spending "special" time alone with children, or writing them a brief note of appreciation, or having an assembly in which students are recognized for various accomplishments (not just academic achievement) are examples of this strategy.

D. Helping Children Deal with Mistakes

The fear of making mistakes and looking foolish is one of the greatest obstacles to developing high self-esteem and resilience. Children with school problems often feel defeated and readily retreat from tasks that may lead to failure. We must help children to realize that mistakes are an important ingredient in the process of learning. We can do this in various ways, such as responding to children's mistakes by showing them the correct way to solve a problem and not by saying things like, "Are you using your brains?" or "You always fail at things!" At the beginning of the school year before teachers have even taught any lessons or given any work, they can bring up the role of mistakes in the learning process. In the discussion, teachers can share memories of their own anxieties about making mistakes when they were students and involve the class in a discussion about the best ways to insure that no student will be nervous about making a mistake. Placing the issue about the fear of making mistakes out in the open typically serves to lessen its potency, thereby increasing opportunities for learning.

In general, resiliency is linked to a sense of optimism, ownership, and personal control. We can serve as the "charismatic adults" in children's lives-- believing in them, and providing them with experiences that reinforce their "islands of competence" and feelings of self-worth. This is a wonderful gift we can offer, a gift that will last a lifetime.