

How To Increase Resilience

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Compassion and love are our oldest medicines. Add to this hope and connectedness and we have the four most powerful ingredients of healing.

Each ingredient alone may not cure a case of the flu but together they will help you resist disease, lower stress, lower blood pressure, avoid a heart attack, protect against depression, increase academic results & longevity and help you live a happier life.

What creates resilience varies at different stages of our lives. The clear indication is that people thrive when they :

Connect with one another

Protect one another

Respect one another

Interventions such as positive psychology and positive youth development show improvements of up to an 18-percentile point gain in academic results. When we add to this, a focus on improving relationships in schools, families and communities, gains increase up to 22% in one year.

When we can take the research findings from positive education and resilience back into classrooms, these results are potentiated further.

Helping students to identify their learning strengths and helping teachers to differentiate based on these strengths is called neuro-developmental differentiation. A tool to enable students to do this is available at www.mylearningstrengths.com

Why this is important

Before we discuss solutions, let's outline the major issues facing us all. I have reported the statistics previously so let's just cover the trends briefly

Bullying

Bullying remains a major barrier to learning and well-being in schools. It peaks in Years 3 and 4 then declines as students mature.

While nowhere near as common as face to face bullying, online bullying peaks in Years 9 and 10.

Attitudes to Violence

The endorsement of violence as a way of resolving interpersonal problems shows a disturbing trend with over a third of boys and one in five girls endorsing violence by Year 9 and 10.

Disengagement from School

Feeling disengaged from learning also slips to a low in Years 9 and 10. Almost one in four students feel disengaged at this stage of schooling.

Low Sense of Worth

Feeling worthless is an indication of shame and disempowerment and sadly afflicts our young women more powerfully than our young men.

These grim sets of figures show that we need to do better.

Pathways to Resilience

The conditions that enable young people to be resilient, empowered, engaged and worthwhile aren't downloadable. They are uploaded one relationship at a time.

Connecting

None of us are as smart as all of us. We create more positive futures for people when we strengthen the cultures in which they develop, learn and live. None of us are stronger than when we are all strong.

Across all year levels, boys exhibit lower levels of social skills than girls. Having social skills powerfully protects against relationship problems and alcohol and drug use.

Students consistently value diversity and are interested in actively helping others. Even young people with very low levels of resilience want to help other people. What possibly prevents young people from connecting with a broader range of people is their low levels of trust and forgiveness.

Young people are good at establishing positive relationships and deriving support from them but when relationships fall into troubled times, they have little idea of how to repair them.

The strength of relationships between students and their teachers lessens in Secondary/high School and with that comes a slowing of momentum.

Protecting

To live in a home where at least one parent or adult loves you, cares for you

and listens to you is a gift that lasts a lifetime.

Our sense of belonging is the most powerful antidote we have to suicide, violence and to drug abuse.

The sense of belonging at school is strong in the primary years with girls having a stronger sense of belonging than boys. Over the secondary/ high school years it wanes to dismal levels by Years 11-12.

Respecting

The perception that your family, friends, school, community and country respect you as a person is a powerful predictor of belonging and resilience.

Feeling alienated, unvalued and worthless does not lead to good outcomes either for the people who feel that way or also for the communities they live in. Marginalisation is a pathway to increased risk.

How to build resilience

We need different strategies to meet different needs at different stages of schooling.

The key implication is that we need to shift from a simplification of the role of teachers as deliverers of curricula to being the developers of brains. Brains develop best in the context of high quality, supportive relationships.

Early Years

The priority is to build a positive secure sense of attachment and the ability to control impulses and regulate emotions.

Years 3-4

Two main priorities seem apparent. Firstly, focus on the development of positive relationships. Broadening and deepening friendships increases the sense of being connected to, and respected at, school. By practicing how to create, maintain and repair friendships we can build values, social competencies and emotional intelligence while protecting against violence, drug abuse and bullying. This requires schools to employ relationship-based approaches to learning and also to behavioural incidents where there is an emphasis on forgiveness and the maintenance of attachment rather than consequences.

Secondly the introduction of Resilient Mindset (Fuller & Hendry, 2018) programs in Years 3-4 to help students learn about their brains and how to optimise them. Students' engage when they experience success.

Resilient Mindset programs involve sessions on:

- building concentration, creativity, learning and memory skills.
- actively building creativity and imagination through exploration of intriguing ideas and phenomena in the world.
- emphasising the essential ingredients of brain power- sleep, healthy eating, movement and exercise.

Years 5-6

Years 5-6 is a great time to consolidate resilience. The social turbulence of Years 3-4 is past and transition is yet to occur. Students are overwhelmingly positive, engaged and we need to capitalise on that momentum.

Firstly, implement the Student Transition and Resilience Training (**START**) program and use building resilience curricula <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/transitions/Pages/start.aspx>

Use www.mylearningstrengths.com to help students and parents learn how brains work and develop the skills that build academic success.

This allows schools to develop strategies for supporting the development of different brain systems by implementing neuro-developmental differentiation. A paper outlining this available upon request from inyahead@satlink.com.au

Develop an emphasis on experiential learning especially in Science, Mathematics and English. This requires additional empowerment of teachers to utilise theatre sports and literacy methods, hands-on mathematics, STEM and entrepreneurialism.

Years 7-8

By Years 7-8 too many students feel unsafe, disrespected and isolated. They have great capabilities but too many of them don't apply them at school. This represents a major opportunity lost. This is a time of maximal neuroplasticity but despite the great surge in cognitive ability, the engagement at school seen in earlier years 5- 6 slows and lessens, positive connectedness weakens and achievement levels in numeracy and literacy often languish.

Students need to learn about how to capitalise on their learning strengths and the increased cognitive capacity of their brains.

A gateway to engagement for this age group is the strength of positive relationships students form with one another and with their teachers.

A series of papers that outline the key features of positive relationships titled The Relationship Quotient (Hendry, Hawkes & Fuller, 2016) are available at www.andrewfuller.com.au

The central intention of managing behavioural incidents should always be “how can we help this student to be a happy engaged learner”. This means that relationships are at the heart of effective student management not rules and consequences.

Years 9-10

Year 10 is when the lowest levels of resilience occur. It coincides with increased feelings of alienation and disconnection. While the origins of this low point may begin earlier through not establishing close positive relationships or having a sense of success at school, Year 10 is the pinch point. If we can make a difference in Years 9-10, we will substantially improve resilience.

By Years 9-10 we have a group of students who feel disengaged from school and are relatively impervious to classroom-based interventions. This means that while building resilience curricula should still be implemented, it will only go so far.

Increasing the knowledge of Year 9-10 students about creating and maintaining positive respectful relationships should be considered. This should be based on the characteristics of successful relationships- trust, forgiveness, integrity, hope and compassion.

Years 11-12

Building resilience in Years 11-12 is about managing:

Organisation and time- compassionate individual mentoring and coaching of students is needed to help them achieve milestones and maintain motivation

Stress- Incorporating anxiety reduction methods into these years is essential. Mindfulness approaches are useful for some but more active and therapeutic forms of anxiety reduction also need to be practiced.

Energy- many students are sleep deprived, overly dependent on social media, eating poorly and not exercising or looking after themselves. It is a recipe for fatigue and sadness.

Aftercare- students with high levels of school belonging are most at risk in the year after school. Linking these students with post-school mentors, past students or people in local industry should be considered.

What resilient schools, families and communities all have in common

There is one overriding principle that all resilient schools, families and communities have. They all follow the golden rule: treat other people as you would like to be treated.

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