



Using Literature to Promote Children's Resilience

by Jennifer Pearson, with contributions by Darlene Kordich Hall

This is the final article in *Interaction's* three-part series on promoting resilience in young children. In the first two articles, we outlined some important factors to consider about the development and maintenance of resilience.

1. We can learn to be resilient by challenging how we think about stress and adversity.^{1,2}
2. Resilient thinking is accurate and flexible and enables creative problem solving, the capacity to see multiple perspectives and the ability to move on with daily life despite obstacles.^{1,2}
3. When young children watch warm, nurturing adults model resilient thinking and coping behaviours in everyday situations, they absorb several critical abilities researchers associate with resilience.^{1,3,4}

These abilities include emotional regulation, impulse control, causal analysis, empathy, realistic optimism, self-efficacy and reaching out to others and opportunity. For more details about these resiliency abilities, see "Critical Abilities Related to the Development of Resilience" in the spring 2007 issue of *Interaction* or Guide 2 in the *Reaching IN...Reaching OUT (RIRO) Resiliency Guidebook*.⁴

In this article, we focus on using literature to help children develop resiliency abilities and become more accurate and flexible thinkers.

By age three, children are actively trying to make sense of things that happen to them.³ For example, a child might think to himself, "Mommy and daddy are fighting 'cuz' I'm a bad boy." Or they may silently believe that a friend doesn't want to play because "she doesn't like me anymore, she thinks I'm stupid."

Of course these thoughts are likely inaccurate, but if such beliefs are left unchallenged, non-resilient thinking patterns can be established resulting in a loss of self-worth. When asked directly about what's troubling them, however, many children reply "I don't know" or simply shrug their shoulders. Using an indirect approach can sometimes be more effective.

Exploring children's thoughts and feelings through picture books can be a pleasurable, indirect and safe way to help children articulate their beliefs and imagine positive outcomes for the challenges they face. Children love listening to stories. Good stories offer multiple layers for learning and discussion – opportunities for readers and listeners alike to validate their experience, broaden their perspective, and generate positive solutions to everyday problems.

Adults who have triumphed over severe childhood adversity often refer to literature as "an influential and satisfying companion in their childhood, because they felt the author was writing to them personally."⁵

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Literature can provide children with concrete examples of how accurate and flexible thinking makes a positive difference in the way a character handles adversity. In the story, *King of the Playground*,⁶ Kevin's dad gently challenges his son's belief that he is helpless in the face of outlandish verbal

threats made by the playground bully, Sammy. The next day Sammy threatens, "If you play here, I will put you in a cage with bears in it." Encouraged by his father's guidance, Kevin playfully responds, "Then I will ride on their backs and teach them tricks." After a few more menacing tries, Sammy realizes he can no longer intimidate Kevin. In no time they are in the sandbox building a fort together.

Children's storybooks also help us promote accurate and flexible thinking by challenging children's assumptions and biases. Used as an inclusionary tool, picture books provide an effective means to explore diversity and educate about differences.



For example, *The Ugly Vegetables*⁷ tells about a young girl of Chinese descent who hates her family's vegetable garden and longs for a plot full of beautiful flowers like her neighbours. Her perspective changes when, enticed by the aroma from her mom's vegetable soup, the neighbours offer bouquets of flowers in exchange for a taste. Her mother invites everyone to join for supper and her daughter glows with pride.

Current resiliency literature tells us that the capacity to value and identify with one's own culture and at the same time value the culture of others is an important protective factor for children's development of resilience.⁸

Most good stories contain themes related to critical abilities researchers associate with resilience. Pointing out how the characters in the story demonstrate these abilities provides children with examples to emulate. For instance, you might say, "The little foxes figured out what the problem was, [causal analysis] then they made a plan to solve it [realistic optimism]. They didn't give up, did they? They kept on trying [self-efficacy]."

According to research, imagination and creativity play a significant role in helping people live through harsh circumstances and construct a healthy future.^{9, 10} We can use good literature to ignite children's imaginations. Children love to make up their own stories based on pictures in storybooks. We can say, "Let's make up a story about the people in this picture." When teachers use this technique, they are surprised and fascinated with children's enthusiastic and creative responses. As children express their ideas about why the characters in the picture act in certain ways, teachers report gaining valuable insight into their beliefs about the world. And this, in turn, helps them better understand children's feelings and behaviour.⁴

For guidelines on how to use this technique, see "People in Pictures: Let's make a story!" in the *RIRO Resiliency Guidebook* (p. 42). And, for an annotated list of children's storybooks that highlight various critical resiliency abilities, go to www.reachinginreachingout.com and click on "Books and Articles."

You probably have your own resiliency favorites – stories that are rich with examples of optimism, perseverance, dealing with emotions, triumphing over setbacks and making the most of life's opportunities. We encourage you to share! Email jennifer@reachinginreachingout.com so we can add your favorites to the booklist on the RIRO website.

Developing resilience is an ongoing process – something we continue for our whole life. The magic of reading and listening to stories joins adults and children in the spirit of lifelong resilience development.

This article is adapted from Guide 11 in the Reaching IN...Reaching OUT Resiliency Guidebook, pp. 42-45.

Jennifer Pearson is lead writer/trainer and Darlene Hall is coordinator of Reaching IN...Reaching OUT (RIRO), an evidence-based skills training program that helps professionals and paraprofessionals promote resilience in young children. For more resiliency resources and information about RIRO's skills training and train-the-trainer programs, please visit RIRO's website (www.reachinginreachingout.com) or contact the coordinator at info@reachinginreachingout.com. RIRO's Train-the-Trainer Program in Ontario is funded by the Ontario Trillium Foundation.

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