



Critical Abilities Related to the Development of Resilience

by Darlene Hall and Jennifer Pearson

This article is the second in a three-part series about resilience that is being published in *Interaction*. Coming next: “Using Children’s Literature to Promote Resilience.”

Over thirty years of research tells us that resilience helps people deal with stress and adversity, overcome childhood disadvantage, and reach out to new opportunities.¹

In the last issue of *Interaction*, the article “Resilience – Coping Effectively with Life’s Challenges” pointed to early educators to model resilient thinking and coping patterns in their everyday interactions with young children. According to researchers at the University of Pennsylvania, our thinking processes directly affect development of several critical abilities associated with resilience.¹ Maintaining these abilities is an ongoing process that helps people of all ages persevere and bounce back from life’s inevitable challenges. Findings from the Reaching In...Reaching Out resiliency promotion project suggest that using cognitive skills that support accurate and flexible thinking can help early educators effectively model the critical abilities detailed in this article.²

Ability 1. Emotional Regulation – Being in charge of our emotions

In stressful situations, our emotions can be overwhelming and adversely affect our whole day. When we’re in charge of our emotions, we can calm down and constructively express our feelings so that we don’t stay overwhelmed.

Emotional regulation affects the way we interact with others, the way we solve problems – even the way we look at the world.

One simple and effective way to regulate our emotions is the old tried-and-true “three deep breaths” method. Slowly inhale to the count of three, letting your breath fill your abdomen, then slowly exhale to the count of three. Repeat three times and experience a surprising calming effect. Young children can be asked to “fill their bellies up like a balloon” as they inhale and “blow out an imaginary candle” as they exhale.

Ability 2. Impulse Control – Pausing to choose our actions

Impulse control is the ability to manage our urges and choose our next steps. For example, when we become angry, we may feel the urge to shout and get into an argument. Impulse control enables us to stop and decide whether these actions will help or hurt the situation.

Impulse control helps us delay gratification, finish what we set out to do and plan for the future.

Children learn how to control their impulses and delay gratification by watching us model restraint and by learning to focus on something other than the desired object.³ We can provide guidance and encouragement in this regard; e.g., “*As soon as Sheena is finished with the firetruck, it will be your turn. If you choose to do something else for now, it will be easier to wait your turn.*”

Ability 3. Causal Analysis – Getting to the root of the problem

Causal analysis is the ability to accurately analyze the cause of a problem or situation. Resiliency research shows that our thoughts about what *caused* a situation or problem affect how we respond. For example, if we believe we hold ultimate responsibility for a stressful day with the children we work with, we may end up feeling overwhelmed, incompetent and inadequate.

On the other hand, if we analyze the day more accurately, we will likely find multiple causes (e.g., ongoing rainy weather, children in transition, staff changes, etc.). “*It’s my fault*” is replaced with “*There’s a lot going on. . . no wonder it felt stressful in the classroom today.*”

Analyzing the situation with more accuracy helps us see that many stresses we encounter are *temporary* and affect



only a *specific* part of our lives. Knowing this reduces our stress, and helps us steer through the challenging period.

We can help children develop the ability to analyze the cause of a problem by teaching them to identify the problem and work together toward a solution; e.g., “*There is a problem here because you both want to play with the same toy. What could we do to solve the problem?*”


We also can help children see the temporary aspects of frustrations and disappointments by first acknowledging their feelings and then offering an alternative perspective; e.g., “*Trying new things can be frustrating at first. Remember, you thought you would never be able to zip up your jacket without my help? And now you can do it all by yourself!*”

Ability 4. Realistic Optimism – Keeping a bright outlook

Realistic optimism is the ability to maintain a positive outlook without denying reality – appreciating the positive aspects without ignoring the negative ones.¹

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We model realistic optimism for children when we acknowledge that there are no magic solutions – that positive outcomes are achieved through effort, problem solving and planning. We can guide them, step-by-step, in problem solving by asking questions like “*What else can happen now?*” or “*How else can we make this work?*”

Ability 5. Empathy – Walking in another person's shoes

Empathy is the ability to understand the feelings and needs of another person. Children develop empathy by being understood and supported by adults around them. By teaching children to recognize their own and other's feelings, we are helping them gain important relationship and resiliency skills.

Ability 6. Self-efficacy – Believing in our competence

Self-efficacy is a belief in our ability to solve problems, handle stress and influence situations.

We can help children believe in their competence by giving them choices that allow them to shape decisions that affect them; e.g., “*It's cold outside. Do you want to wear your hat or pull up your hood?*” Children also experience competence when they are given opportunities that challenge them yet ensure their success.

Ability 7. Reaching out – Taking opportunities and assistance

Reaching out is the ability to take opportunities that life presents. Resiliency research suggests that people are more willing to risk trying new things if they see mistakes as inevitable and simply part of life.⁴

We can model that “*no one is perfect*” by talking with children about how we make and fix our own mistakes. Normalizing their mistakes with an encouraging, “*Everyone makes mistakes – it's how we learn*” gives children the confidence to take risks.

We can also remind children of their accomplishments, highlighting that they are indeed growing and learning every day: “*When you were a baby, could you walk? And look at you now! You run so fast, I can hardly keep up with you.*”

Another important part of reaching out is being realistic about how much we can cope with and asking for help from



friends or professionals when we need it. We can help children reach out by modelling that it is okay to ask for help – that we all need support from others sometimes.

It's not that we either have or don't have resilience. All of us possess some well-developed abilities and some that need work to increase our capacity to bounce back. Gaining and sustaining resilience is a life-long process. Children watch, copy and absorb our effective responses to stress and opportunity. Resilience truly can be learned.

This article is adapted from Guide 2 in the *Reaching IN...Reaching OUT Resiliency Guidebook*, pp. 4-8). For more information about developing resilient thinking and coping styles, please visit: www.reachinginreachingout.com. Click on "Guidebook & Videos."

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1. Reivich, K., & Shatté, A. (2002). *The resilience factor*. New York: Broadway Books.
2. Pearson, J., & Hall, D.K. (2006). RIRO resiliency guidebook. Toronto: Child & Family Partnership, pp. 53-59. [The Guidebook is available on RIRO's website: www.reachinginreachingout.com, click "Guidebook & Videos." A copy can also be ordered from the CCCF.]
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ERRATUM:

The list of references in "Resilience – coping effectively with life's challenges" (*Interaction*, Winter 2007) was from another version of the article. The correct list is included below.

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