

Building resilience: Creating a foundation for positive youth outcomes

Megan K. Dubay, M.Ed., and Georgia Hall, Ph.D.

The study of resiliency has emerged out of research about at-risk youth. Researchers could not explain the successful development of some children faced with barriers such as poverty, abuse or neglect, which put them at risk for tremendous challenges in school, personal relationships and future employment. Research shows that enhancing protective factors, such as resiliency, reduces risk factors related to substance abuse, violence and academic failure (Morrison et al., 2000). Our challenge as after-school professionals is to encourage in communities and families an awareness of the importance of resilience in child development and to foster resiliency and other protective factors within our youth during our program hours. There are multiple ways that after-school programs can promote resiliency and other positive developmental factors.

Youth-Centered Program

There is a difference between an after-school program whose approach is youth-centered and that which is not. Youth-centered programs make youth feel comfortable, supported and safe in exploring their interests and identity. The program needs to reflect young people's interests, identity and culture. Youth need to be brought in as equal partners and owners of the program. Decision-making processes and the program culture need to recognize the value of youth contributions. Programs should plan to include youth in planning meetings, gather input for activity ideas and regularly create youth leadership roles.

Staffing

The after-school field can promote resiliency by supporting our greatest resource: the staff members. Hiring practices and professional development activities should reflect an interest in supporting resiliency development. Special attention needs to be placed on hiring staff members who are able to model being a resilient adult (Janas, 2002).

After-school practitioners, when given the proper tools through professional development, have the opportunity to promote resiliency and other positive character traits through their mentorship. Helpful training for staff could include training on: managing confidential conversations; positive reinforcement/behavior management techniques; referral processes and community connections; identifying and processing feelings; and modeling strong conflict resolution (Massachusetts Advocates for Children, 2005).

Building relationships

A key supporting factor in the development of resilience is a strong relationship with a competent and caring adult. Those children with the propensity for being resilient tend to seek meaningful connections with supportive adults and excel at building close relationships with mentors (Day, 2006). If these relationships are nurtured in out-of-school time programs, staff members can make a more profound difference with the children they serve.

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Encouraging staff members to be active participants in youth activities and to fully engage in conversations with youth during activities and transition times allows opportunity for youth to grow their relationships with staff members. Creating free-time activities and spaces open up opportunities for connection that otherwise may be lost.

Additionally, a component of supporting relationships needs to be "high, clearly articulated expectations" for the youth and the "purposeful support necessary to meet those expectations" (Krovetz, 1999, pg. 10).

Program environment

One of the most important contributions that programs can make is to provide a safe and predictable environment in which youth can interact. This involves ensuring that program policies and guidelines are in place that guarantee respect for all youth, honor diversity and address disruptive or harmful behaviors.

Youth who have experienced trauma need a healthy and consistent place to feel calm and anxiety free. Program directors should review their use of loud noises, communication style and language when interacting with youth.

As schools focus more time solely on academics, there is less time for curricula focusing on social and emotional development. Youth need developmental opportunities that include decision-making, risk-prevention and positive youth development, which encourage resilience and other positive qualities.

The after-school setting has the opportunity to work toward filling in these important developmental gaps that youth may miss during the rest of their day (Smith, 2007).

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Megan K. Dubay, M.Ed., is a school counselor in Massachusetts and also works on special assignment at the National Institute on Out-of-School Time. Georgia Hall is senior research scientist at the National Institute on Out-of-School Time.



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