



Of all the lessons you learned growing up, it just may be the most important: Life isn't always fair. Sometimes it can be downright cruel and leave you with more questions than answers — questions like “Why did this happen to me?” and “What do I do now?” The answers to questions like these are seldom simple and often don't offer the comfort and resolution you are seeking at the time. But the process of asking them, of learning how to examine your life and cope with challenges, can make a world of difference — especially if you learn these skills at an early age.

Originally thought to be an inborn trait, resiliency is now considered a process that can be cultivated in the classroom, and many educators are doing just that. From Palo Alto to Riverside, teachers across California are discovering what new research is also showing us: Resilient students are better focused on learning and perform well on standardized tests. They aren't incapacitated by a breakup or not making the varsity team. Instead, they understand the way they approach disappointments can help them gain a positive — or just a different — perspective. What's more, this important life lesson extends far beyond the classroom, as resilient students go on to become resilient adults capable of handling life's ups and downs. >>>

Resiliency

Stories by Sherry Posnick-Goodwin • Photos by Scott Buschman

Teaching students to bounce back

Keira Flionis greets every student at the door with a handshake and a personal greeting when they enter her classroom at Wells Intermediate School in Riverside. When something goes wrong, she talks about the importance of “bouncing back” and hands out rubber balls to make her point. She focuses on her students’ strengths and what they are doing right, rather than their weaknesses.

Flionis, a member of the Alford Educators Association, attempts to foster resiliency in her students, because she believes it will help them do better in school and better in life. She doesn’t teach it as a separate subject; rather, she incorporates her philosophy of being resilient in her regular curriculum.

She decided it was necessary after realizing that resiliency was the “missing piece” to help her low-income students be more successful. She attended training on how to foster resiliency in students, and started applying what she learned in day-to-day teaching. As a result, she says, her classroom became a better place.

“I firmly believe that looking at resiliency had a huge part in that,” says Flionis. “The trick, I believe, was in focusing on what the individual students already had going for

them. Before the training, I was focusing on what was wrong with the class.”

For example, if a student misbehaves, she may take that student aside and comment on that student’s ability for natural leadership, and ask them to use that strength in a positive way. “Instead of saying ‘stop that,’ I’ll remind them that they know what’s right.”

Necessary coping skills

Flionis says students these days are under more stress, but lack basic coping skills — and the ability to recover from adversity — in a way that previous generations did not. She counts herself among the growing number of educators who believe it is necessary for schools to foster resiliency among students, since these skills may not be taught at home.

Nan Henderson, who taught the resiliency workshop that Flionis attended, believes that it is important for educators to communicate a resilient attitude that says to students: You have what it takes to get through this.

“I interviewed a young man a few years ago who had lived a painful life of loss and abuse,” says Henderson, who has worked with school staff in Santa Monica, Los Angeles, and other districts throughout the state. “Most of his adolescence was spent in one foster home after another. He told me that what helped him the most in attaining his own resilient outcome was people along the way that told him: What is right with you is more powerful than anything that is wrong.”

“In my trainings, people tell me that this is difficult to do,” continues Henderson. “For example, a child who is skipping class and responding with anger and belligerence to any offer of help presents a typical paradox: At the very same time a person is weighed down with problems in one area of life, he or she



Nan Henderson

also has strengths somewhere else. The challenge is both to be aware of the problems and to draw upon the strengths of the person to help solve them — as well as to sincerely communicate the belief that the current problems can be successfully overcome.”

Another example might be a student struggling with family problems who is failing two classes. Instead of confronting the student with the problem, another approach might be, “I know about all the problems in your family. Please tell me how you have managed to do as well as you have done? Perhaps we can use these things to bring up your grades in math and science.”

Henderson has created the Resiliency Wheel (see sidebar, below), which displays six key elements to help build resiliency into the school environment and mitigate risk factors.

The Resiliency Wheel

Nan Henderson created the Resiliency Wheel to encapsulate the six key factors in developing resiliency in students.



It includes three strategies for building resiliency in the environment:

- 1 Provide caring and support** through positive relationships with adults and peers.
- 2 Set and communicate high expectations** of success and reward small steps in the right direction.
- 3 Provide opportunities for meaningful participation** and contributing to others.

It also includes three strategies for mitigating risk factors in the environment:

- 4 Increase pro-social bonding** through positive activities such as sports, drama, and community service.
- 5 Set clear, consistent boundaries** with fair expectations and appropriate consequences.
- 6 Teach life skills** such as communication, problem solving, stress management, and conflict resolution.

For more information on Nan Henderson’s training, visit www.resiliency.com.



LEFT: California Faculty Association member Frank Lilly at CSU Sacramento.

Bolstering resiliency skills

Davidson Middle School in San Rafael has launched a pilot program to bolster students' innate resiliency skills. Davidson staff members are working with a local nonprofit, CorStone, meeting weekly for 28 weeks in groups of 10 with trained facilitators who are either therapists or therapist interns. So far, the program has paid off in dividends, says Steve Leventhal, CorStone director. Suspensions have been reduced by half, and a formal evaluation by University of San Francisco shows increased levels of student optimism and decreased pessimism.

Students are asked to consider their strengths, and to build on those strengths by improving their social and emotional skill sets. They learn healthy ways of dealing with their emotions and how to work out conflicts without involving teachers, administrators or counselors.

"These days you can definitely see a need for it with behavior such as cutting," says Alison Jacobs, a counselor and San Rafael Teachers Association member, referring to students who mutilate themselves. "We have students who are saying, 'Help, I need coping skills, I don't know how to do this.'"

Jacobs finds it ironic that schools are putting more pressure on students, but decreasing services for counseling and mental health. "Kids are going through so many



Joanne Cohen
United Educators of
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changes in a world that is continuously changing. In the classroom, standards are getting tougher, and students need to know curriculum earlier. In the news they see violence, people doing drugs and people committing crimes. A lot of them have parents who are always working, so there's not that time at home for them to learn these skills and values. So it's up to schools to give kids the necessary coping skills."

"We are teaching them life skills and ways of resolving conflict that are self-empowering, peaceful and accountable," says Leventhal. "They are settling things in a way that is respectful of others, as opposed to a punitive and isolation model."

Safe haven for students

At the School of the Arts in San Francisco, the Wellness Center offers a safe haven for students to chill and discuss problems such as stress, violence and abuse, depression and suicide, sexual orientation, chronic illness, eating disorders, family issues, peer relationships and risky behaviors.

Teens today are under enormous pressure, comments Joanne Cohen, Wellness Center coordinator. "They start testing here in second grade. To get into our school, they have to audition, like in the movie *Fame*. For kids who are motivated, even a 4.0 GPA is



ABOVE: Tenth-grader Cassie Griley at the San Francisco School of the Arts.

not enough. To get into a UC, they need AP and honors classes."

Their problems are exacerbated by technology, with some students cyberbullying and spreading gossip via texting and Facebook, says Cohen, an education support professional and member of United Educators of San Francisco.

"I try to foster awareness that they may be using negative coping skills when it comes to

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When it comes to understanding why some people are resilient and others aren't, there are no easy answers. According to *Psychology Today*, everyone has the potential to be resilient, and resiliency can emerge in both childhood and adulthood. A 1998 study found there are some common characteristics of resilient people: They keep in mind that bad times are temporary; they believe in themselves; they accept help from others and seek help from family members, teachers, mentors and friends; they set goals for the future; they believe their struggles have made them stronger. While some individuals seem to have resiliency and others haven't yet tapped theirs, there is definitely much more stress in the lives of young people today than in years past and more challenges for them to face with resiliency.

- > The poorest children are bearing the brunt of the recession's impact, according to UCLA's Institute for Democracy, Education and Access, and California topped the list in foreclosures and unemployment.
- > California's homeless student population from preschool to 12th grade grew from 178,000 in 2006-07 to 288,000 in 2008-09, an increase of more than 25 percent annually, according to the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth.
- > A survey of 6,008 South Los Angeles high school students in 2008, conducted by South Central Youth Empowered Through Action with technical help from Loyola Marymount University, showed a high percentage of students exhibiting symptoms of clinical depression.
- > A new UC Berkeley study shows that poverty affects children's brains, impairing language development and "executive function" or the ability to play, remember details and pay attention in school.

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drinking, smoking pot, promiscuity or cutting themselves," says Cohen. "It may feel good for them to yell and scream, but that's not a coping skill that will be helpful in the long run."

To help bolster resilience, Cohen tries a different approach. "I'll encourage them to remember what kinds of things make them feel good, such as listening to music, jogging, playing basketball and dance class. Things like dancing can cause a higher level of endorphins and a sense of well-being. Sometimes they forget how good it feels to move their bodies. They get too busy, stressed or depressed to do the things they like to do."

Some students, notes Cohen, find it therapeutic to write down their thoughts and feelings. But she advises them to do this the old-fashioned way, on paper, rather than online in a way that makes them more vulnerable.

"Sometimes teens just need some perspective and a little bit of a reality check," she adds. "Is it a real crisis — or just a temporary situation?"

Cohen received a pink slip, and doubts she will be rehired by the district next year. Students say they will miss her sage advice for coping with life's problems.

"We're all panicky about getting into good colleges and stuff, and there's a lot more pressure," says 10th-grader Cassie Grilley, 15. "Someone like Ms. Cohen is unbiased and helps you to get through whatever is going on."

Transition to college life

Once students get into college, they may find themselves adrift for the first time in their lives, says Frank Lilly, a professor in the Teacher Education Department at CSU Sacramento. They have difficulty juggling time management and priorities. For the first time in their lives they are making their own decisions — and based on those decisions, they will either sink or swim.

"They may be used to doing things at the last minute and it being okay, and suddenly it isn't okay," says Lilly, whose specialty is educational psychology. "They find themselves in a conundrum because they've always been able to do well, and they are not doing well."

Lilly, a member of the California Faculty Association, is involved in programs to help freshmen survive the college transition. One program, the Guardian Scholars, is designed to help students exiting the foster care system. Another, First Year Experience, is a semester-long course to help students acclimate to the university. Students in that program have higher graduation rates than students not in the program.

Lilly believes that today's college students are less resilient than their predecessors because years of testing and test preparation have robbed them of critical thinking skills and the ability to self-reflect.

"One of the best ways to be resilient is for someone to self-access their own me-

ta-cognition," he explains. "They need to be able to ask themselves, 'How should I study?' 'What is the best way to do this?'" One of the strongest ways students can learn resiliency is through problem-solving strategies, questioning and reflecting."

College instructors can help by being on the lookout for students who are having

difficulties adjusting and seem unduly stressed out.

"The best thing a teacher can do is notice," he says. "Be aware of signs that a student is having incredible difficulty. It's hard, but I try to get to know students by name. I notice when they are doing well and speak with them about what they can do differently. I want to help them succeed. That's why I'm here." ✦

BY CTA PRESIDENT DAVID A. SANCHEZ

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agree on what that change should be and how to achieve it will take more than a quick, easy conversation. But it's a conversation we must lead for the sake of our students and schools. That's why, in addition to recommending a full slate of pro-public education candidates for the November election, CTA has collected signatures to qualify an initiative to repeal unfair corporate tax breaks. This initiative is just a start to changing state tax structures to ensure that everyone is paying their fair share. Big corporations are getting tax breaks at the same time state budget cuts are breaking our schools, and that's just not right. So CTA will lead the charge to rescind these tax breaks, which were handed out to the state's largest corporations.

In addition to working on the state budget and preparing for the

November election, we will be monitoring a lot of other issues, like ESEA reauthorization, throughout the summer. We want to make sure your voice is heard on the important issues that affect your classroom and schools. To make it easier for you to advocate for public education and to send a clear message to lawmakers in Washington and Sacramento, we are introducing a new real-time lobbying effort for members who sign up. You can sign up by texting CTASUMMER to 69866 or e-mailing SummerAdvocate@cta.org; we'll keep you informed throughout the summer. Working together, we can elect officials who are pro-education and pro-student, and help our schools get the funding they so desperately need.

