

8 Ways to Help Your Students Build Resiliency

One thing we shouldn't do is shield kids from everyday frustrations. by Samantha Cleaver

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We've all been there: After passing back the math quiz, a frustrated sigh and "I'll never be able to do this!" comes from the corner of the room. And we've all met the student who's so afraid of failure that he refuses to try anything new, whether that's reading a more challenging book or doing a long-division problem that looks more difficult than the one he did yesterday. Then there are the kids who are rarely discouraged. They understand that even if today was tough, tomorrow is a new day.

The difference between the kids who bounce back easily and those who can't seem to recover from the frustration is *resiliency*.

Resiliency comes from kids' beliefs and attitudes about themselves and what happens to them. Fortunately, these internal factors—humor, inner direction, optimism and flexibility—are traits that we can build or strengthen.

One thing we shouldn't do is shield kids from everyday frustrations. They need to experience everyday failures and challenges. It's the kids who never feel frustrated (or who experience excessive stress) who are vulnerable later.

Here are three ways to develop student resiliency in a moment of frustration, and five ways to build resiliency in your classroom for the long run.

In the Moment

Keep perspective.

To you, it's a small thing (one quiz grade, missing a turn at the block center, presenting in front of the class), but to the student it's a disaster. Keeping perspective isn't about minimizing the problem or insisting that it could be worse: It's about problem solving.

What You Can Do:

Triage the situation: Help the child think about other quizzes that are coming up, the time he spent at the block center yesterday, or the way she prepared for the presentation, to show them that this is one event among many. Then, plan ways to tackle these stresses in the future.

Capture the opportunity.

We do kids a disservice when we step in too soon so they never experience making mistakes. (For example, when a parent corrects a child's homework errors before he turns it in.) In fact, children learn more when we allow them to make mistakes. It's all in how we teach them to handle it.

What You Can Do:

Praise effort: What you praise shows what you value. So focus praise on kids' effort or creativity. A huge mistake could show a lot of creativity and ingenuity, even if the outcome is a disaster.

Cool down.

Of course, the best time to teach cool-down strategies is before kids get upset, but in-the-moment is the time to get them to practice those strategies.

What You Can Do:

Cool-down corner: Create a cool-down corner with heavy pillows and calming music with headphones, or books. Teach older kids to count to 10 while taking deep breaths or to distract themselves by reading or writing until they've calmed down.

For the Long Term

Create connection.

Relationships are key to resiliency, and it's not the number but the quality that counts. In addition to the emotional benefits, the best way to learn how to deal with minor stresses is to have it modeled by peers.

What You Can Do:

Spin a web: Create a web that shows how the kids are all connected to one another. Then, use that web to figure out where and how you can build new connections.

Peer mentoring: Instead of doing show-and-tell or another presentation, pair kids up and have them teach one another something they know, share a book they read or explain a favorite hobby.

Build competence.

Every student is good at something. In particular, students may struggle when they don't see the connection between their strengths transfer across situations—think of the student whose multiplication skills are strong, but he struggles to apply them to word problems.

What You Can Do:

Compliment cards: Make it a habit to leave [sticky notes](#) with compliments on your students' desks. Plan out a delivery schedule that will make it feel random to keep them pleasantly surprised. Even better, use those compliments to call out students for their strengths—during a social studies project, ask a curious child to create a list of questions about the Revolutionary War, for example.

Give them options.

Choices give kids power and self-determination, plus it lets them make choices and live with the consequences, however minor. Giving kids authentic (not false) choices doesn't have to be complex—choices around how to complete an assignment are enough.

What You Can Do:

Choice boards: Provide a list of choices that students can make with each assignment. For younger students, this could be a limited list of options (answering questions out of order, choosing to skim a passage before reading it). For older kids, this could be a discussion about different ways to approach a project.

Would You Rather? Playing "Would You Rather?" shows students how different people approach the same situation and takes them through the decision-making process. (Here is one [list of WYR questions](#). [This site](#) has lots of WYR questions for older students.)

Connect with characters.

Books are a great jumping-off point for talking about resiliency. For example, *Chester's Way* and *Sheila Rae, the Brave* by Kevin Henkes, novels like *Hatchet* by Gary Paulsen, and biographies provide a lot to talk about when it comes to resiliency.

What You Can Do:

Focus on control: During discussion, focus on the choices the character made. This helps students understand that how we handle situations is within our control. And ask: What other choices could the character have made? And how would it have changed the outcome?

Encourage constant progress.

Setting and achieving goals builds the practice of self-monitoring and helps students see the results of their hard work. The trick isn't in setting goals but in sticking with them.

What You Can Do:

Stair steps: Have students set big goals, and identify a few steps along the way. Then, have students reflect after each step about what helped them get there and what they want to keep, or stop, doing.

We do kids a disservice when we step in so soon so they never experience making mistakes. In fact, children learn more when we allow them to make mistakes; it's all in how we teach them to handle it.

- from "Eight Ways to Help Your Students Build Resiliency"