

BUILDING RESILIENCE

DRAWINGS IN THIS BOOK WERE CREATED BY STUDENTS AT REGENT PARK PUBLIC SCHOOL IN TORONTO



Building Resilience is excerpted from Possibilities: Addressing Poverty in Elementary Schools, co-written by Charmain Brown and Jim Giles. This teacher resource is meant to help urban and rural school communities better understand and support children and families living in poverty.

Possibilities provides an overview of poverty in Ontario and Canada and assists schools and educators in rethinking challenges, assumptions and biases around poverty issues. Each section of the book and CD contains practical first-hand examples of school-based innovations and initiatives from ETFO's multi-year Poverty and Education project.

This teacher resource is unique in that it challenges deficit-based thinking towards children and school communities experiencing poverty with practical, day-to-day examples of strategies to support the academic and non-academic needs of students in a positive and inclusive manner.

*To order this resource, go to etfovoice.ca/shopetfo/possibilities

One of the greatest challenges for teachers today is enabling each student to succeed academically. Research has shown that children from families living in poverty are less likely to succeed academically, and the numerous and complex factors that contribute to their lack of success often are not easily addressed by teachers and society. Effective educators that believe that they can successfully enable all students to succeed, do so by making this outcome a priority for everyone in the school. Teachers know that they need to give particular attention to children living in poverty when they plan and deliver day-to-day instruction, assessment, and classroom experiences in order to meet the needs of all learners.

“Sometimes, a student will take the time to seek out a former teacher and thank him or her for the positive impact made in the life of that student many years earlier. Such acts of gratitude often come as a surprise to teachers, who never realized what a formative role they may play in the lives of their students. Resiliency often works this way. Teachers provide an environment that enriches young lives. In this environment, students gain the ability to deal with unforeseen challenges with a positive attitude. They are able to work through the challenges and are strengthened because of those difficult situations. Resilience research suggests teachers have an indispensable role to play in generating an environment where every student who enters their classroom can develop the ability to triumph over challenge.”

– Kingsley Hurlington, *Bolstering Resilience in Students: Teachers as Protective Factors*, Trent University. Ontario Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, February 2010.

Resilience allows individuals to bounce back, or to recover, from difficult experiences or chronic challenges in their lives. Resilience gives students the ability to deal with challenges and adapt to new or difficult circumstances in a positive, productive manner. The word resilience comes from the Latin *resilire* which means to bounce back. The Oxford dictionaries define resilience as “the capacity to recover quickly from difficulties”. Many children from families living in poverty become resilient – they have learned to bounce back from the social and economic deprivation they have experienced. Resilient individuals can more effectively cope with, or adapt to, stress and challenging life situations. Resilient individuals also learn valuable lessons through their resilience, making them better able to cope with future stresses and challenges. Sometimes, young people take on parental roles when a parent cannot cope. For some young people, being confronted with adult issues and problems can lead to negative results while the more resilient ones may develop the ability to multi-task, organize, solve problems, and make decisions when tackling adult responsibilities.

Research has revealed that positive social relationships, positive attitudes and emotions, the ability to control one’s own behavior, and feelings of competence, promote resilience in individuals. (Doll, B., Zucker,

S., & Brehm, K. *Resilient classrooms: Creating healthy environments for learning*. New York: Guilford Press 2004) Why then can one student overcome obstacles, while another student cannot seem to cope? What

makes one student rise above difficult circumstances, while another succumbs to them? Identifying the common characteristics of resilient students can be the first step in building resilience in students.

RESILIENT CHILDREN OFTEN DEMONSTRATE:

A Sense of Autonomy: Resilient children have a sense of personal power, independence, and increased self-esteem (when compared to other at-risk peers). Positive emotions, such as love and gratitude, increase resilience because they serve as a buffer against depression and other negative reactions.

Problem-Solving Skills: Resilient children possess a greater ability to be flexible, reflective, and think creatively, allowing them to find alternative solutions to cognitive and life problems.

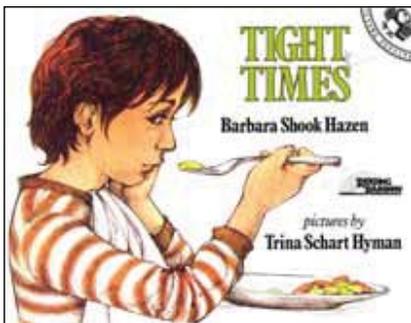
Social Competency: Resilient children exhibit a high level of interpersonal skills including: qualities of caring and empathy for others; strong communication skills, especially a sense of humour; the ability to foster positive relationships, particularly with caring adults who mentor them, treat them fairly, listen to them, and do not judge them.

A Sense of Purpose and Future: Resilient children are often realistic, goal-oriented, and set optimistic expectations regarding their future; through their past successes, they perceive themselves as competent in academics, athletics, the arts, or in other areas.

Students tend to experience academic resilience when they have opportunities to learn and develop effective problem-solving and information processing skills; complete homework; participate in classroom activities; and pursue opportunities in the arts, sports, and recreational activities inside and outside school. No one can guarantee that children will live without socio-economic challenges; however educators can improve a student's ability to cope with adversities encountered by helping them develop resilience.

“Children who believe that they can't meet academic expectations or that education isn't the answer to the problems of poverty are doomed as their beliefs become their reality. The real problem for children in poverty may not be weak academic skill set or lesser resources, but rather a lack of hope that they can alter their life conditions through effort.”

– *Rediscovering hope: Building school cultures of hope for children of poverty.* Phi Delta Kappan, November 2011. p. 44



LITERATURE LINK TO RESILIENCE

Barbara Shook Hazen (1983)

Tight Times

Puffin Books. (Primary/Junior)

Tight Times is about a family doing their best to cope despite their financial troubles. The young boy in the story wants a dog, but when he asks his father for one, he is told that he cannot have one, as these are “tight times. The boy receives his wish in a surprising way when he finds a starving kitten in a trash can on the same day his father loses his job.

WHAT SCHOOLS CAN DO STRATEGIES FOR BUILDING RESILIENCE

- **Provide a caring, supportive learning environment.** Feeling cared for and safe builds students' resilience. Promote positive social connections between staff members and students, between students and their peers, and between home and school.
- **Foster positive attitudes.** Help students believe that they can succeed when they try. Provide situations in which students are able to succeed. Frame failure as a learning opportunity. Teach students how to re-evaluate and adjust strategies that may not be working.
- **Nurture positive emotions.** Be a model and give students the chance to practice positive emotions, such as optimism, respect, forgiveness, and empathy. Reinforce emotional intelligence, praise students for successes, and avoid judging students or criticizing their failures.
- **Foster academic self-determination and feelings of competence.** Provide consistent and clear expectations. Help students develop a menu of homework and study strategies. Encourage students to attend school regularly and to develop talents in activities that they enjoy. Teach them to set realistic goals and obtain necessary resources.
- **Encourage volunteerism.** Social competence and resilience are fostered when students help others in their home, their school, and in their community. Create and promote a variety of opportunities for students to contribute to the well-being of others.
- **Teach peace-building skills.** Teach them conflict resolution and peer-mediation skills, strategies for standing up to bullies, and violence-prevention strategies.
- **Help students become appropriately assertive without being aggressive.**
- **Ensure healthy habits.** Good physical health prepares the body and mind to be more resilient and contributes to school success. Encourage good nutritional habits through school food offerings, and reinforce the importance of adequate sleep and exercise, through education and increased opportunities for exercise. Facilitate stress reduction by incorporating positive stress control strategies, such as meditation, controlled breathing, yoga, and exercise, into school curricula.

– Virginia Smith Harvey, *Schoolwide Methods for Fostering Resiliency*, University of Massachusetts, Boston, 2007.

ASSESSMENT STARTERS:

- 1** How do you and your staff listen to students and validate their feelings while demonstrating kindness, compassion, and respect for all?
- 2** What strategies have you and your staff developed to tap into students' own strengths, interests, goals, and dreams as the beginning point for learning?
- 3** What does your school do to develop responsible individuals, allowing them to participate in all aspects of the school, express their opinions and imagination, make choices, problem-solve, work with and help others?