

MAKING STUDENTS BULLETPROOF

Resiliency—the Paradigm of Hope

BY V. BAILEY GILLESPIE, GARY L. HOPKINS, AND STUART TYNER

Teachers go into the education business because they care about students. They worry about the ravages of at-risk behavior, such as involvement with drugs and promiscuous sex. They create and implement programs to protect their students and provide information about the dangers of life-threatening behaviors, hoping to dissuade youth and young adults from even casual experimentation.

However, the abundance of information has not solved the problem. Punchy

governmental slogans (“Just Say No!”), a “war on drugs,” expensive TV ads, strong religious and secular prohibitions, and role-model warnings have all been tried. Yet teens are still involved in behaviors that put them at risk—at an ever-increasing and alarming rate.

Around the world, alcohol and drug abuse continue to contribute to rising medical costs, the transmission of AIDS, violence at school and home, automobile fatalities, sexually transmitted infections, unemployment, reduced work productivity, and antisocial be-

havior.¹ Is there anything we can do?

Resiliency—Making Your Students Bulletproof

Recently, research has shown that we *can* make a difference, and has shown us how.

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A new and powerful paradigm arising from behavioral research has inspired hope. It is being called *resiliency*. The paradigm suggests that, instead of just loading on information, we can find dynamic ways to make teens “bulletproof.” We can help them make life-affirming choices that protect them from at-risk behavior.

In scientific terms, *resiliency* means the capacity to maintain competent functioning in spite of adversity or life stressors. Resiliency appears to develop over a period of time, but only with significant environmental support.² Despite severe hardships and at-risk factors, resilient individuals learn to cope and even succeed.³

Attributes of Resilient Youth

Most of us have read that children who are sexually or physically abused, whose parents are alcoholics, or who face severe hardship while growing up are at great risk socially and academically. However, some of these young people do quite well. Rather than focusing on the shortcomings of youth who are at risk for academic failure, drug use, or other at-risk behaviors, resiliency studies try to identify

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factors that account for their success.⁴

Researchers define *resilience* in terms of “hardiness” and suggest that the following characteristics are typical of people who develop a resilient approach to life:

- They have a strong commitment to self and/or to God.
- They are willing to take action and deal with problems. They have a strong ability to use their religious faith to maintain a positive vision of a meaningful life.
- They have a positive attitude toward their environment.
- Most have a strong sense of purpose.
- They develop a strong internal motivation that enables them to see life’s obstacles as challenges that can be overcome.⁵

It’s All About Hope

Resiliency seems to be about *hope*.

Resilient youth are opti-

mistic that adversity can be overcome, that there is life beyond the obstacles of today. Additional factors associated with resilient youth include the following:

- Easygoing temperament or disposition;
- Intellectual capabilities, especially verbal and communication skills;
- Realistic appraisal of their environment;
- Confidence that their internal and external worlds are predictable, controllable, and hopeful;
- Ability to deal with social problems;
- Sense of direction or mission, such as evidence of a special talent, passion, faith, or strong interest;
- Capacity to understand and respond to others’ feelings;
- Sense of humor;
- Adaptive distancing, such as the ability to think and act separately from troubled caretakers.⁶

Family Protective Factors

Families play a significant part in developing these skills. Here are some important family factors that help protect youth:

- Consistent, warm, positive relationship with a caring adult;
- Positive family environment and bonding;
- High but realistic parental expectations;
- Assigned responsibilities and household tasks;

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search and literature about resiliency, both in the U.S. and other countries: A sincere and enduring relationship with a caring and charismatic adult—someone with whom they identify and from whom they gather strength⁹—is the *most* significant factor in the lives of youth and young adults.

Where do such relationships come from? The answer seems obvious: older adults or mentors—teachers, youth pastors, and significant others who take the time to form meaningful relationships with young people. Getting such people involved with our students is the most important thing we can do to encourage resilience among youth.¹⁰

A relationship with an individual who provides care, warmth, and unconditional love appears to provide young people with a sense that they can overcome the odds. These relationships can foster self-esteem and a sense of self-worth, which make successful coping more likely.¹¹ One study found that “resilient youngsters all had at least one person in their lives who accepted them unconditionally, regardless of temperamental idiosyncrasies, physical attractiveness, or intelligence.”¹² International Valuegenesis research concurs, showing that loving, supportive families and significant faith dialogue with important others contribute to faith growth and maturity, as well as reduced at-risk behaviors.¹³ The evidence is overwhelming. Re-

- Positive parental modeling of resilience and coping skills;
- Extended support networks, including family and friends.

School Protective Factors

The Valuegenesis research on Adventist youth in the North American Division revealed that having high standards was a more effective function of *family life* than church or school life. In fact, in some ways, focusing attention on proper behaviors only in the church or school interferes with building a mature faith and getting young people to avoid negative behaviors.⁷

As a secondary family unit, the school provides significant opportunities for students to develop decision-making skills and resiliency. The Valuegenesis research reveals nine effectiveness factors we call “potentials” for schools, including student involvement in policy decisions, teachers being caring and supportive, and fair discipline in the context of a Christian faculty.⁸ It is interesting to note that research in the secular community is discovering now what our Valuegenesis research explored almost nine years ago.

The Importance of Relationships

One factor emerges repeatedly in re-

siliency comes from *supportive relationships!*

School as Community

Valuegenesis research indicates that the quality and frequency of parent-child discussions about faith life are significant in encouraging mature faith and building strong, resilient youth.¹⁴ Unfortunately, some students come from poor home environments. In such cases, teachers and pastors must undertake the difficult task of trying to overcome these influences. Other students come from homes where a single parent spends long hours working to support and educate the family, leaving them without sufficient time to develop meaningful relationships. Their children may be unattended after school, when youth at-risk behavior is the highest. (Research shows that most adolescent girls who get pregnant do so between the hours of 3:00 to 6:00 p.m. in their own homes.¹⁵)

How can the school help build resilient youth? School-based research indicates that educators can create an environment that moderates the effects of the

less-than-ideal homes or social environments. It suggests that “resilient kids have an uncanny ability to make school a refuge from society’s ills.”¹⁶ Recent research has explored the benefits of school as a place characterized by supportive and caring relationships, opportunities to participate in activities and decision making, and where norms are shared. When students see their school as a community, they enjoy school more, are more academically motivated, are absent less often, engage in less disruptive behavior, have higher academic achievement, use drugs less, and participate in less delinquent behavior.¹⁷ The climate in school becomes an important factor in building positive “relational” behavior.¹⁸

Applying the Research

It appears that we can diminish or even prevent drug use and other at-risk behaviors by making our schools a warm, caring place where students benefit from relationships with Christ-centered adults. How can we improve on what we provide without overburdening already-busy teachers? Here are some suggestions:

1. *Encourage local churches and pastoral staff members to get involved in the life of your school.* Research indicates that, in some areas, less than 40 percent of pastors show their support for Christian education.¹⁹

2. *Search for people in your community of faith who can help you create a positive sense of school as a community.*

3. *Involve retired church members.* They have much to contribute to the life of your school.

4. *Start with kindergarten.* Identify two warm, caring members from your local church who will come into the classroom between 8:00 and 11:00 each morning to assist the teacher. Their job will be to help the students with reading, math, or other subjects. Most importantly, they will develop relationships.

Next, find two more people to come to school from 11:00 a.m. until 2:00 p.m. to do the same thing. Schedule this for every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. If you have enough people to participate, use them every day, all year long.

When the kindergarten students move on to the first grade, have those same in-

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dividuals continue on with them, to grade one and two and so on. Add additional adults until you have a group of 10 or 12 for each classroom. This will give the students enduring relationships with Christ-centered adults over a long period of time. This could continue through the eighth grade or even into high school. This strategy, or a variation that suits your specific situation, should result in your school producing resilient students.

5. *Ask pastors, youth, and young adults to participate in the life of your school.* If they are not available, appoint honorary “chaplains” from your student body. Perhaps you can organize a group of church members to take on this project as their commitment to Christian education. Their being available at regular times as mentors, teacher’s aides, and counselors can create a significant presence for Christ in your school.

What Might Happen if . . .

There may be additional benefits from applying this process of relationship building to create a positive school community. Community members—including church members—are often critical of schools. By involving the adults from your community of faith, you may enjoy greater support from your local churches. You may even find that financial support for your school will improve.

Start small. Motivate five or six people at first. Screen everyone, just as a teacher is screened, with background checks, fingerprinting, etc. There are predators looking for a chance to get close to young people. Be careful, but don’t let this stop your efforts.

After implementing the program with a few adults, evaluate your progress. Iron out the wrinkles. Evaluate constantly. Learn as you go. Expand over time.

Does It Work?

Evaluation is crucial. Is the research borne out in actual practice? Try evaluation at three levels.

- Evaluate the teachers’ reactions. Refine the process.
- Evaluate the students’ performance. Compare end-of-year grades and tests with scores from previous years. Also, evaluate student deportment.
- Evaluate the adults who participate.

Resiliency seems to be about hope.

Are they satisfied? How has this changed their attitude regarding your school? Has it changed their lives in any way?

After evaluating, report your findings. Tell educators in other schools or the newspaper what is happening in your school. Evaluate and refine, and do it better next time.

What Would Jesus Do?

Jesus mingled with people where they lived. He built bridges to people who hurt. He loved unrelentingly and fully. He understood their personal needs, and challenged them to embrace higher values and standards. He motivated them through His passion and compassion to be what they knew they were not. What better model of education than trying to build relationships with those in need?

This generation places much stock in relationships. We must seize the opportunity to use the research in this area to model in our schools the ministry and lifestyle of Jesus. ✍

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