SUPPORTING
MENTAL HEALTH IN PRIMARY AND EARLY YEARS

A PRACTICE-BASED APPROACH

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RESILIENCE

Children with good levels of resilience are able to recover quickly from adverse experiences. They demonstrate the ability to 'bounce back' from negative situations. However, the concept of 'bouncing back' is problematic because it assumes that adverse situations are not permanent. For many children poverty, for example, is a permanent rather than temporary state. In addition, some experiences are so traumatic that it is not possible to simply 'bounce back' from them and carry on as though nothing has happened. Being resilient in the face of adversity is an important character trait, and schools play a critical role in fostering this in children. It is not always easy to protect children from negative experiences. Such experiences may arise in the family, community, peer group or in the school. Schools cannot solve all the problems in society at the same time as educating children. However, schools can influence how children respond to these experiences to help them move forward in positive and productive ways.

Resilience is a multi-dimensional construct. Children need to be resilient to the academic challenges that they will encounter in school. Therefore, it is possible to be resilient in some situations and not in others. They need to persevere when faced with challenging tasks and they need to be resilient to feedback that they receive from their teachers. Children also need to demonstrate social resilience in friendships. This is particularly necessary during times when there is conflict within friendships that needs to be resolved. Children who experience bullying, discrimination or harassment will need to demonstrate resilience to enable them to cope in these situations. However, although children can demonstrate resilience in these situations, this does not mean that bullying should be tolerated, is inevitable and that children should simply be tougher when experiencing it. All forms of bullying are wrong and being resilient in this situation involves being able to
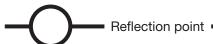
ask for support. Reaching out for help is a key characteristic of someone who is resilient. Psychological resilience is required during times when their confidence, self-esteem and motivation may be tested. Some children are more resilient than others during times when they experience transitions. Transitions are particularly challenging for children, for example, when they change classes, move schools or move to a new home or community, and during these times children may require additional support to enable them to be resilient. Digital resilience may be required, particularly if children experience digital content that they find upsetting on the Internet. Digital resilience enables children to report abuse and other forms of inappropriate content that they experience online. Children who are digitally resilient are able to challenge inappropriate content and talk to adults about it rather than simply going offline.

Despite the need for resilience, it is important to state explicitly that schools must play a crucial role in promoting a positive culture that enables all children to be mentally healthy. Resilience should never be used as a justification for placing children in stressful, anxiety inducing or traumatic situations. Clearly, adverse situations in the home or community may be outside the influence of schools, unless there are issues of safeguarding. However, schools can support children during these times to help them to be resilient to family and community factors. This chapter explores the role of schools in empowering children to be resilient to adversity.

Chapter Objectives

This chapter will help you to understand:

- what is meant by resilience
- the role of school in fostering resilience.

⸺◯⸺ Reflection point ⸺

Resilience is not just the emotion of not being upset by events, in children it is a fundamental foundation to being able to learn. Consider your own resilience: when are you able to cope with change? What impacts on your positive emotions and causes you to question whether you are able to tackle a new challenge? As teachers we have a very public job with interaction with children, parents, professionals, governors and inspectors. Each of those groups provides their own challenges and stresses, but teachers are expected to manage these and still provide a very high-quality educational experience. NQTs have often been protected by their placement school professionals when they are training, but then find that in their first school they are under scrutiny from the first day onwards. Their resilience is often low as they progress through their first term as they are tackling everything at once and it does not feel as though they have had a break from observation and potential judgement. The activity at the end of this chapter is focused on teachers rather than children because we believe that resilience is particularly important for school professionals.

Key Theories

It has been stated that 'Resilience is a characteristic that emerges out of the systemic interdependence of children with their families, communities and schools' (Doll, 2013: 400). It is not just a trait which lies within individuals. It is not fixed. It can develop and be strengthened. Government policies shape families, communities and schools. They affect the experiences of individuals. Therefore, emphasising resilience as an individual character trait rather than interrogating the systemic influences which affect a person's resilience is not adequate.

Children can demonstrate resilience on an individual task but lack resilience in a task which requires peer collaboration. Children might be resilient in team sports but lack resilience in reading. They might be resilient at home but not at school. If children are provided with loving, nurturing and supportive environments in their families and communities, these factors can be protective. Children who are born into nurturing environments develop confidence and a positive sense of self. This can have a positive impact on their resilience in school. Children who do not form secure attachments with a primary caregiver (see Bowlby's work, 1956, on attachment theory) and those who endure adverse experiences in their homes and communities can develop a poor sense of self and low confidence. These factors can reduce resilience. Adverse experiences cut across a range of social and cultural backgrounds and do not only occur in families where there are high levels of deprivation.

Schools have a significant role to play in developing resilience in all children, but they cannot completely negate the effects of adverse childhood experiences that children have experienced in their families and communities. However, caring, nurturing, empathetic teachers and other professionals in school can help children to realise that they will be able to achieve their full potential despite these experiences.

Theory into Practice

Whilst children can be taught about resilience as a discrete strand of learning, it is crucial that teachers encourage children to develop this skill throughout the curriculum. For example, when children encounter a challenging problem in mathematics, they need to be resilient and persevere with the problem rather than simply giving up and admitting defeat. Carol Dweck's work (2012) on 'growth mind-set' is a useful strategy to enable children to understand that although they might find something difficult at a specific point in time, they will eventually be able to master the skill. For example, some children might find reading challenging. Their instinctive reaction might be to say that a book is too difficult for them. In this context we can support children to read a short section of the book by using their knowledge of word reading strategies. Success breeds success: once they realise that they can do something, this will provide them with the confidence to succeed.

Teachers can support children to understand that there may be times when we need to be socially resilient, for example in friendships or during group tasks. Social interactions

are not always straightforward. There are times when we disagree with other people and situations which result in friends falling out. This happens frequently with children and adults, and even between colleagues in professional contexts. We can help children to manage these situations by teaching them some skills of conflict resolution. It is all too easy for adults to step in and to resolve disputes between children. However, providing children with the skills to manage their own conflict is far more effective because it gives them ownership of the situation. It also provides them with vital skills that they will need in everyday life.

Children need to be taught that the purpose of feedback is to enable them to improve. Some children develop a sense of failure when they read teacher feedback. They often focus on the targets that have been stated and the things they have done wrong rather than what they have done right. This can result in learned helplessness, which can lead to disengagement. It is too easy to assume that children will understand what we are trying to achieve through providing children with constructive feedback on their learning. Explicitly teaching children that the purpose of feedback is developmental rather than critical or judgemental is a useful way of developing resilience to feedback.

It is important to remember that resilience is context-specific. Children may be resilient in contexts outside of school, but not in school. This is particularly evident when they lack confidence with their school work or have low self-competence in relation to aspects of the school curriculum. It might also work the other way around. Sadly, some children gain their self-esteem through school, but are also exposed to adverse situations in the home that have detrimental effects on their self-worth. In academic contexts we can support children to become more resilient by helping them to realise that they are already demonstrating resilience skills in a range of other contexts. A child who is resilient at sport can become resilient in mathematics once they realise that they already have this skill. They simply need to transfer the skill from one context to another. We can also be honest with children by talking about challenges that we may have found difficult as adults but have, nevertheless, overcome. We can support children to understand that finding things difficult in school is perfectly normal; if learning is always easy, then it means that there is a lack of challenge.

Teachers can support children to understand that they can recover from adverse experiences. However, it is also important for teachers to remember that some children will take longer than others to recover from situations and to acknowledge children's experiences of adversity by showing empathy. Some children may never fully recover from an adverse experience, but nevertheless are able to move forward through being resilient. Examples include experiences of grief, loss, trauma, parental conflict, abuse and neglect. We should not expect that children are able to simply pick themselves up, dust themselves down and move forward from a situation. Some adverse experiences, such as those listed here, can have long-term effects which extend into adult life. As teachers it is important to demonstrate empathy, patience and support in these situations.

Case study 7.1

Early Years

In the Early Years Foundation Stage children are expected to show motivation in active learning as one of the characteristics of effective learning. In Reception, children need to be resilient in order that that they can demonstrate an ability to keep trying at tasks so they can develop self-motivation. At four years old this is a challenging expectation. Child A was academically able but was unlikely to achieve a good level of development (GLD) as they were struggling in the PSE areas of development. Child A usually engaged in parallel play – exploring different areas of the setting alongside, rather than together with, other children. Their behaviour was good and they related well to adults, and it was only when the teacher completed the profile for resilience and struggled to answer the statement related to coping well when friends do not choose their game or activity, that they realised the child may actually have some amber or red in their profile. This highlighted a concern with the profile for very young children in sifting knowledge and understanding from emotional development.

To support Child A, the teacher designed activities that required the child working with other children and were challenging to complete quickly. They started with activities that Child A found easy so they could act as 'teachers' in the partnerships; for example, the child was asked to help another child complete a jigsaw. The jigsaw was simple for them but the adult working alongside the children modelled how to support the other child to find pieces without doing it for them. Then the adult stepped back to see if the interaction continued. Child A was not going to do this instantly as there was no extrinsic value for them initially; it was only once they wanted the contact of other children that they developed their willingness to play with other children, not just alongside them.

Case study 7.2

Key Stage 1

Resilience in the classroom involves being prepared to keep trying at a skill, making and learning from mistakes. The way we teach at school using stages of learning encourages this confidence, and children are not labelled according to their ability which can limit what they are exposed to during the learning session. The first stage is a mixed-ability problem-solving activity, relieving the teacher to circulate the class judging who has mastered the task, who needs some support or who does not yet have the knowledge. The second stage then separates the children into groups so they can apply their skills to a new task or receive additional input. Stage 3 leads to new learning so that the most able are being challenged with mastery activities and the other children are applying new concepts to problem solving. The fluidity of the classroom is very challenging as the teacher has to be able to 'juggle' children as they gain

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confidence in their learning but also re-teach skills when it is apparent a child requires it. The fact that children are not labelled means that they do not have a ceiling to their learning – they can be doing a level of task they might not have been presented with if the teacher had pre-determined their capability. To support children's resilience, the teacher often offers a range of tasks for the children to attempt at three different levels but without letting them know which the harder task is. Very often children will choose a task that is more challenging than the teacher might have given them and they are determined to achieve what they have chosen.

— Case study 7.3 —

Key Stage 2

At a time when we were finding Year 6 challenging with children showing little resilience to fall outs and with some children deliberately hurting the feelings of others, the Year 6 teacher decided to try something novel to help build their resilience. The teacher brought in a range of board games and puzzles. The children were put into groups with mixed ability and with children who struggle to get on with each other. Some of the children had never played these games before and needed their peers to be patient so that they could learn the rules. The children with low resilience struggled at first, but the teacher said it was really good to see how the children who had been hurting others actually supported their peers. Because the atmosphere in the classroom was relaxed and the children were playing, they were prepared to take more risks. Successful risk-taking leads to greater resilience, and with a game the children did not feel the risk was too challenging. The mixed-ability grouping worked well because children who may not have been as strong at writing or maths could take part in games that relied on simple rules. With this sense of enjoyment rather than academic challenge, children were talking more with each other and enjoying the session. However, one of the difficulties some of the children have on the playground is losing – in organised football and basketball games on the playground some of our most vulnerable children cannot cope with loss and they come into the classroom in the afternoon upset or having to take part in a restorative conference after a behaviour incident. Many of these children take part in competitive sport outside school where the sole goal is to win, so they feel under pressure to be the best and are not expected to be happy with losing. With the board games the aim is also to win, but the teacher made sure that the children realised that whilst winning was the aim, the purpose of the session was enjoyment and involvement, not just winning. At the end of the afternoon, the children were asked to self-evaluate their role in the game playing; they had to grade themselves in three areas: how well they had involved other children; how well they had followed the rules; and how well they had managed the winning and losing elements of the game. The children had not thought about these things as they were playing and they had not been told that the afternoon's activity had an alternative agenda. They used a simple traffic-light system to grade themselves, and this was discussed in groups.

Learning from the Case Studies

Early Years

Entering Nursery can be a testing time for resilience: children who have been part of a small family unit where the boundaries are clear find themselves having to accommodate the needs of others. Children at three or four years old do not have the filter for emotions that older children and adults are expected to apply so that they can they conform to social norms. Young children cry in the way they did when they were babies as they return to non-verbal means of communication – when they are distressed or anxious they do not have the vocabulary or the restraint to talk about it. Child A has vocabulary and academic ability, which was why the profiling was quite difficult initially. Often older children in the year, or those who are academically able, are considered to be better with emotional and social development. This is not necessarily the case. The profiling across the seven aspects of emotional wellbeing highlights the variances within a single child – it is unlikely that any child will have a profile where every aspect has the same colour. Observations help to provide the nuances of the child's social and emotional development required for the profile as well as the assessment against the Foundation Stage document. This was the key outcome for the teacher of Child A – they realised that initially they had made assumptions and that social interaction for Child A was not going to be learned in the same way as they had learned academic skills. The adult modelling play was an approach emerging from the sustained learning conversations that adults employed across the setting. The teacher was going to continue to develop this practice in social learning to provide personalised learning.

Key Stage 1

A 'stages of learning' approach to personalisation builds resilience because the children are leading the learning and taking on challenges. They learn how to admit that they need help and how to challenge themselves, concentrating on complex tasks to demonstrate their mastery of the subject matter. Through feedback during lessons, children are receiving the input they need to keep trying and to develop the higher-order thinking skills they will need to tackle more complex tasks. This learning approach nurtures the emotional elements of learning as the child is conversing with the adult on how they learn as well as what they are learning – the root to meta-cognition or understanding how learning occurs. Through meta-cognition children build a 'toolkit' of strategies to approach learning in different contexts: they learn that mistakes can be helpful; that problem solving strategies can be applied across the curriculum; and that asking for help is fine once they have tried something for themselves or with peers. Teachers find the approach taxing as they cannot always predict

the journey a child will take through the learning towards the overarching learning objective. However, over time, the children become more predictable as teachers get to know them better. As the children become familiar with the approach their resilience increases, as they do not find being moved between groups as negative as they feared and realise it is improving their learning.

Key Stage 2

The important element of the board game activity was not the games themselves but the cooperation that was needed to complete the task. The relaxed atmosphere meant that children were not worried about learning outcomes and could enjoy the session. The teacher learned that children who could be very challenging in terms of their behaviour towards other children were able to accommodate them when they were given a responsibility such as teaching them the rules to the game. Two children in particular, who had previously exhibited very challenging behaviour, were patient and encouraging to children they had previously upset. The teacher was surprised how successful the game playing was, especially when children did not win but were able to manage their emotions despite this. The most important outcome for the teacher, though, was the self-evaluation at the end of the session. The children who had previously been challenging were less able to carry out the self-evaluation than others. The teacher considered this to be because they had less intrapersonal awareness. However, children analysing their role within the game playing could be applied in different circumstances and would help them develop their resilience when playing at break-times, which was when most of the behaviour incidents occurred, creating a restorative approach to behaviour.

Applying the Case Studies to Your Own Practice

Statements related to resilience for children:

1   Will keep trying even when they are finding things hard either academically or socially.
2   Copes well when friends do not choose their game/activity.
3   Confidently separates from parents/carers.
4   Does not catastrophise events, making them more negative than they are.
5   Wants to overcome any difficulties in order to succeed.

In this chapter the exercise to try for yourself focuses on your own resilience. However, the statements above are the ones to use to profile the children. To establish the security of your judgements it would be useful to try one of the case studies outlined above and analyse if your children respond in the way the case study children did.

Step 1: Complete the statements for yourself using the following adult version and judge whether they would be red, amber or green if you were to complete the petal like the children

1   I am prepared to keep working on a new skill until I accomplish it.
2   I cope well when other people do not share my ideas or are critical.
3   I am self-reliant.
4   I do not catastrophise events, making them more negative than they are.
5   I want to overcome any difficulties in order to succeed.

Step 2: Carry out the following activity

Teaching can feel like an isolated profession, even though there are a lot of people in the same place of work. Resilience is essential in order to manage the processes involved in teaching young children. As a term progresses, the pressure to reach targets and balance expectations from different groups of stakeholders can become overwhelming. The idea of this activity is to reflect on what the triggers are for you affecting your ability to be resilient and considering strategies that can be put in place to help.

There are several activities in teaching that can cause stress and stress can adversely affect a teacher's resilience. Grade the following aspects of teaching 1 to 10, with 1 being easily manageable and 10 being very stressful for you:

- Having to plan effectively for a wide range of children, offering personalised learning for all.
- Managing the behaviour of children.
- Meeting the needs of children with special educational needs.
- Having interaction with parents who may question the way you are working.
- Having observations from senior leaders or external professionals.
- Managing the unexpected incidents, e.g. a child is sick, the fire alarm goes off.
- Completing work to a deadline, e.g. summative data recording, weekly planning submission.
- Catching the germs that children bring to the classroom and having to work through a cold or chest infection.
- Teaching lessons that you are not so confident with or planning for a school event, e.g. performance, report writing.
- Leadership – generally staff are given a subject or area of responsibility early in their career, which is another area of scrutiny on top of class teaching and another aspect of accountability.

Step 3: Evaluate the activity outcomes

Once you have graded each statement out of 10, sort them in order of the lowest to the highest number. Identify those things that cause you the most stress and impact

most on your resilience. Take the list to a member of staff you trust and discuss with them ways in which you could better manage them to raise resilience. In a school that is doing a good job of managing staff mental health, there should be someone identified for staff to discuss any issues in relation to emotional wellbeing. If not, then your line manager or coaching partner would be appropriate to ensure that you are able to manage the range of stressors and to help you develop your resilience.

Step 4: Apply the evaluation of the activity to general practice

Being attuned to your emotions and resilience is important in order to be able to put supportive measures in place before you become overwhelmed. Having graded the list above you will have become aware of your personal 'hotspots' – aspects of teaching that cause you the most stress. Your school may already have coaching in place, but it is useful for you to identify someone who is able to manage the areas you find difficult and arrange regular opportunities to talk with them. It can also benefit your coaching partner to engage in this process as they help you by outlining how they manage their stress, but it can also help them to realise that they have effective strategies to support their own resilience. For example, when I (Sarah) get stressed by having a too-long 'to do' list that makes me feel I cannot do anything, I do something mundane like writing my diary on my whiteboard. I do not have to think in order to complete the task, it involves a walk away from my desk looking at my list, and I can actually tick something off, proving that I can in fact make a start on my list. Sharing strategies does not take away the fact that these jobs need doing, but it helps you to realise that you can do them.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter we have examined the concept of resilience. We have argued that resilience is a multi-faceted concept and that it varies across a range of contexts, including family, community and school. We have demonstrated ways in which schools can nurture the development of resilience skills in children. We have also argued that schools play an important role in enabling children to transfer their skills of resilience from one context to another.

Further Reading

Pearce, C. (2011), *A Short Introduction to Promoting Resilience in Children*. London: Jessica Kingsley.

Goldstein, S. and Brooks, R. B. (2014) *Handbook of Resilience in Children*. New York: Springer.