

Using books to foster resilience in young children

After a few short decades of resilience research, we are now beginning to look at children and their ability to bounce back in a different light (Benard 2004). Although it was once thought children were unable to readily overcome adversity such as loss, poverty, abuse, and neglect, new information is presenting a different outlook on children and their innate ability to upright or “re-center” (Ginsburg 2011).

In reality, children are much more invincible and able to recover from challenges when caring adults intentionally reduce the risk factors in their environment and provide protective factors to stop problems before they start (Masten 2001; Garmezy 1985). Through the use of children’s literature, caregivers can implement a resilience-building curriculum with minimum change and small effort. But first, a working definition of resilience is necessary.

Defining resilience

Terms such as *emotional hardiness*, *bouncing back*, *buoyancy*, *developmental adaptivity*, *standing upright*, *being invincible*, *becoming invulnerable*, and *re-centering* are common in resilience literature (Benard 2004; Masten and Garmezy 1985; Brooks and Goldstein 2003).

But a much simpler definition of resilience is the ability to cope with adversity and come back or rebound from extreme hardships or events (Benard 2004; Petty 2009; Ginsburg 2006). Children who most often are able to cope and bounce back after loss and separation seem to have a resilient core and high amounts of self-efficacy or *enoughness*.

Some kids display more emotional hardiness than others, but all children possess resilience-building tools (Benard 2004). Consider a toy that floats to the top of the water or is *buoyant* after being pressed down. In resilience studies, more than two-thirds of children in extreme hardships will bounce back or

become buoyant over time (Werner and Smith 1982, 1992; Ginsburg 2011).

Using children’s literature, caregivers can help children bounce back by intentionally placing resilience-building experiences and skills in the curriculum that serve as protective factors. Let us explore protective factors that can be fostered through the use of children’s books.

Protective factors and children’s literature

Children’s literature has long been used to teach concepts. Stories are beneficial because they assist us in bringing attention to the challenges that young children face while providing ways to cope or even overcome them. Books that tell stories of characters faced with challenges or problems to solve are best because they can become the background for talks about the elements of resilience. Making friends, coping, problem solving, having structure and rules,



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planning and making choices, and using opportunities for helping are a few of the topics of resilience building found in children's literature.

With minimal effort, caregivers can be instrumental in providing literature for some of the most important protective factors such as coping, problem solving, and setting boundaries that foster resiliency and reduce risks in the environment for young children. Helping children to become more resilient may be the most important thing that caregivers can do in providing a buffer against emotional hardships.

RESILIENCE IS THE ABILITY TO COPE WITH ADVERSITY AND COME BACK FROM EXTREME HARDSHIPS OR EVENTS.

Dr. Kenneth Ginsburg (2006) wrote that teaching children the tools to become more resilient is even more important than teaching them the three R's. In truth, children who self-right or remain buoyant after challenges are better able to learn the three R's! Knowing how to select books with themes of resilience building is key and easy to do with a few short tips.

Guide for selecting books to foster resilience

Acquiring books to foster resilience is easy, and many that you already have on your bookshelf can be used. For optimum experience, choose books that have the following attributes:

Problem-solving messages. Help children develop protective factors such as helping, sharing, coping, and problem solving with books such as *I Am Not Sleepy and I Will Not Go to Bed* (Child 2001) or *Harry the Dirty Dog* (Zion 1956). Look for books with problems to solve or overcome rather than those that are more for entertainment purposes only, such as *Today Is Monday* (Carle 1997).

Appeal. Books must appeal to children as a first criterion, or any concepts that you hope to foster may be lost. Which books do children ask for again and again? These may have storylines that can be enhanced to foster resilience.

Developmental value. Choose books that are age and stage appropriate for children. Children in my care often brought books to the program from home that were for older siblings. Even if the books have lessons to be learned or challenges to overcome, rethink using them if they are not developmentally appropriate for your age group when fostering resilience. Or use select pages from the books that you can highlight or do an activity in resilience building (Petty 2009b).

Availability. Look for books that you already have in your library. Many books that you read each day can be expanded as you retell stories to point out the characters and their challenges or hardships. For example, after reading *The Little Red Hen* (Muldrow 2001), revisit the story to talk about the way that the hen chose to overcome her need for help. She had the ability all along to meet her needs without the help of anyone else. In other words, she was more resilient than she thought.

Reflect the Goldilocks rule—Not too hard and not too easy but just right. When selecting books, read through the book first to determine if the story plot is too complex for the children in your care. Are the characters easily identified and easy for the children to get to know?

Can the children follow the storyline to think about more pro-social or positive endings, such as in *The Three Billy Goats Gruff*? After reading this story, I asked a group of 4-year-olds, "Why do you think the troll was so mean to the billy goats?" A child responded, "'Cause he was hungry!" He not only understood the storyline but could make assumptions about one of the main characters. We then thought of additional endings to the story that included feeding the hungry troll.

This simple practice in problem solving served as a gateway to other books with unfair or anti-social endings that could be changed to make things right. Just right or simple plots make this much easier because the books are read in a short period with little time for discussion.

After using books for a while to build resilience, allow children to identify the protective factors that the books may highlight. Also, it's not necessary to turn every story time or book reading with children into a lesson in resilience building. Opportunities will naturally present themselves that allow story time to provide an added bonus. By using this short

guide, you can begin developing activities with children's books to foster resilience straightaway.

Children's books and resilience activities

Teachers can play an important role in fostering resilience by intentionally placing it at the forefront of the curriculum. Although we can't prevent adversity or unpleasant experiences from happening to children, we can minimize the distress they feel by teaching them a vocabulary of emotions with the use of children's books.

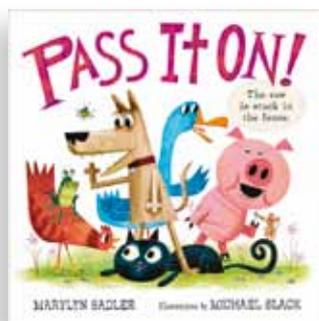
We know that the protective factors listed below relate to working with young children in caring environments and may help them overcome adversity (Brooks and Goldstein 2003). Some books may allude to more than one protective factor, but for simplicity only one factor appears for each book.

The following children's books can be used with preschool and early school-age children. They are examples of how books can anchor discussions about resilience. Examples of activities that use open-ended, interactive discussions accompany each book. Children as young as 3 years can understand challenges and think of positive ways to re-do a behavior or provide a new way to respond.

Helping

Pass It On by Marilyn Sadler (2012) tells the story of a cow who gets stuck in the fence and her barnyard friends who take a while to rescue her. As they pass on the message about Cow, there is much miscommunication among the animals. In the end, the animals help Cow to get unstuck from the fence by working together.

Lead a discussion about how Cow must have felt as she waited for help to come. Ask for other ways that Bee could have helped Cow out of the fence. Have the children think of times when they have

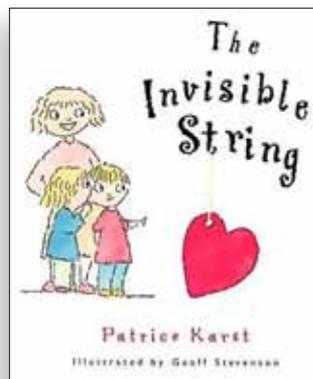


been stuck or placed in a situation where they could not do something without the help of others. How does it feel to help others? For more action, role play the story with and without masks or costumes as children pretend to be

the barnyard friends who help Cow get out of the fence.

Coping and patience

The Invisible String by Patrice Karst (2000) can be used to develop coping skills when children are separated from someone



they love by showing them that even though they are separated, they can still be connected by an invisible string. Whenever the child thinks about the separation, the invisible string gives a tug to remind the child of a continuing connection even though

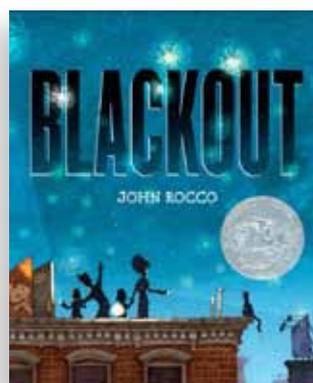
the child can't see the loved one.

Use maps to locate loved ones around the world or even across town. Tape a piece of string between the child and the loved one to provide a visual of the connection.

Children can also learn ways to develop or practice patience as they wait for a loved one to return. I often use an invisible *patience button* with young children when waiting in line or for a turn. I draw an invisible circle on the arm (and mine as well) and push it to activate our patience. Then we think of things to do while we wait.

Problem solving

Blackout by John Rocco (2011) is about a city where all the lights go out and the people find ways to



cope by getting together and enjoying each other's company rather staying alone in their houses. Besides problem solving and coping, this book addresses building friendships.

Rather than reading the book once and putting it away, use it more than once to as you lead

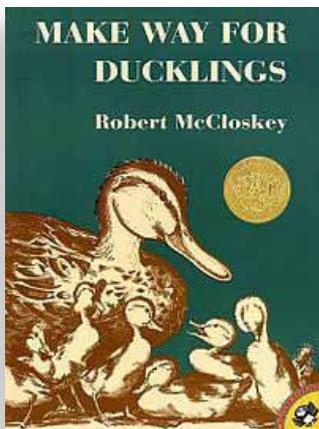
a discussion about all kinds of adversity and how people can join together to work through a difficult time. What if the lights went off in the school? Think

of different ways to cope with this adversity by turning down the lights and re-enacting the story. What are some things that children could do without lights? Provide flashlights and read the story again. Help children overcome fear by thinking of five activities to do without electricity, or by thinking: "How did people long ago get by without electricity"?

Responsibilities and jobs

In *Make Way for Ducklings* by Robert McCloskey (1941), Mrs. Mallard shows responsibility by taking care of her family of ducklings, providing a safe place for them to learn to fly.

Talk about the responsibilities that we have to and for one another. Are there pets in the classroom? Can children with younger siblings help their parents



with tasks as simple as getting the baby's clean diaper? Feeling needed within a larger group is a big protective factor in children, and our classrooms are a perfect place to foster responsibility. What are some ways that you allow children to be responsible for their learning environment? Assist the children in making

helping charts for home or school. Post them in plain sight and encourage children to update them after they have performed the tasks.

Choices and decision making

Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus by Mo Willems (2003) is a lively story about a bus driver who steps away from his bus and tells the audience (us) not to let the lurking pigeon drive. On each page, the pigeon petitions us to let him drive. This is a good book to discuss during as well as after reading: its questioning format lends itself to child interaction.



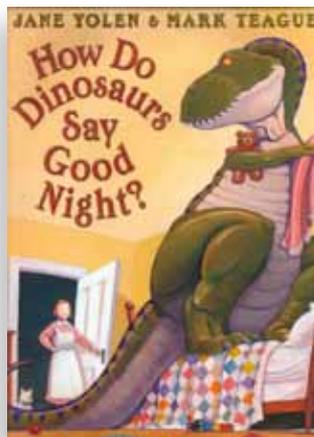
When I read this story to my grandsons (3, 4, and 5 years), it took

several pages of reading for them to understand that we were being asked the questions and that it was OK to answer.

Open-ended questions to ask include the following: "Why can't we let the pigeon drive the bus?" "What would happen if we let a bird drive a bus?" "What happens when we don't follow directions?" Accept all answers and discuss good choices and decisions.

Structure and rules

How Do Dinosaurs Say Good Night? by Jane Yolen and Mark Teague (2000) is a rhyming picture book that delightfully chronicles the bedtime antics of dinosaurs who don't want to



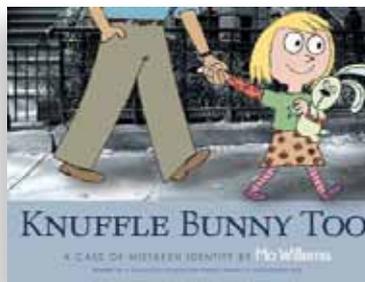
go to bed. As the parents consistently follow bedtime rules, the dinosaur (children) do all sorts of activities to prolong going to bed.

Discuss the importance of having rules and why we need them. Have the children copy the actions of the dinosaurs and the reactions of their parents. Talk

about a better way to prepare for bed or any other activity that children may not want to do, rather than "stomping and slamming his tail and pout!" Help them find humor in doing the things that are challenging for us.

Making friends

Knuffle Bunny Too by Mo Willems (2007) is a story about two girls who become friends after getting



their favorite stuffed animals mixed up at school. Making friends is an important resilience tool.

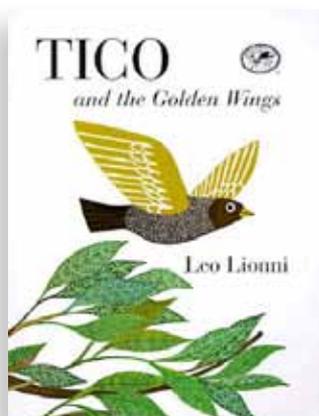
Ask open-ended questions such as these: "How do we

make friends?" "How do we keep our friends?" Make a chart with picture and the title: "Ways to Be Friendly." Ask children to think of the last time they

behaved in a friendly way. Write the responses on the chart. Help children identify their behaviors as friendly or unfriendly. Discuss how to change the unfriendly behaviors to friendly ones. Refer to the book often when mediating unfriendly incidents.

Opportunities to participate and contribute

Use the story *Tico and the Golden Wings* by Leo Lionni (2007) to assist children in thinking about participation in a community and how, by making contribu-



tions, we can become stronger as individuals and as a group. In this parable, a little bird who is born without wings is granted a wish and receives golden wings, which turns the other birds against him. As he flies over the earth and sees someone in need, he gives away a golden feather; in its place, a

new black feather grows. This process continues until he looks like other birds. Tico realizes that giving to others is as important as having wings for himself.

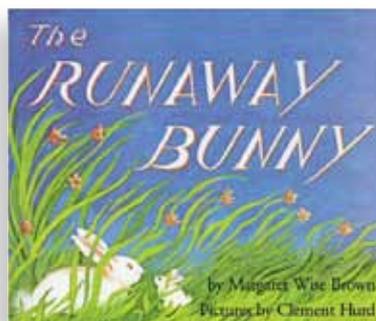
Contributing to a cause greater than ourselves is huge protective factor and one that we can begin teaching early. Look for ways that the children in your care can share their time (helping one another), their abilities (painting pictures for a local home for the elderly), and their resources (bringing canned food for a local food pantry or shelter). Ask open-ended questions such as: “Why did Tico give away his feathers?” “How can we participate with others in our classroom or community?” Ask children to think of ways to help others in the school or community. Make a Tico board by providing feathers and have children place them on the board whenever they contribute to their community.

Caring relationships and empathy

The Runaway Bunny by Margaret Wise Brown (1977) is a timeless classic that describes a caring relationship between a mother bunny and her little bunny.

Have the children take turns being the mother and her bunny. Lead a discussion on relationships and

what it means to have people who care about us. Display photos of families or invite the children to



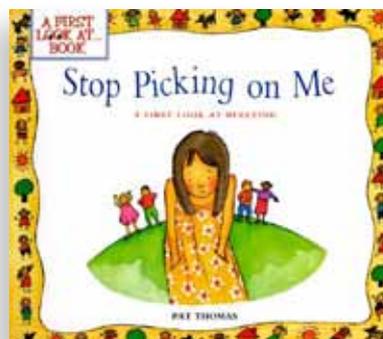
draw (or paint) their families. Ask questions such as: “Whom do we leave at home when we go away?” “Who are our important people?” “Why did the mother bunny tell the little bunny

that she would follow wherever the bunny went?” Building relationships as well as modeling how we sustain relationships (by solving our problems) is important in fostering resiliency.

Setting boundaries

Stop Picking on Me by Pat Thomas (2000) introduces the concept of making boundaries when someone mistreats us.

Use this book to open a discussion about how it feels to be picked on and ways to set boundaries



(visible and invisible). Teach non-violent ways to maintain one’s personal space while respecting the personal space of others, using verbal and non-verbal methods.

After reading the book, use the characters to discuss appropriate treatment of others by having children assume the roles of the characters in the book.

Hula hoops are good visual objects to illustrate the boundaries that we need to keep us resilient. Place several on the floor and allow the characters in the book to stand inside them. Next, have the children practice stating their needs. Some examples: “I need for you to respect my boundaries.” “Say kind words to me.” “Be my friend.”

You can also use images such as imaginary bubbles. Pretend that we are all in our own bubbles and that bubble space is necessary to help us learn about boundaries. Ask questions such as these: “How

much space does your bubble need?" "If you float into someone else, what is the right thing to do?" "How can we protect everyone's boundaries without the bubbles?"

IT'S NOT NECESSARY TO TURN EVERY BOOK READING INTO A LESSON IN RESILIENCE BUILDING.

This is by no means an exhaustive list of children's books that can foster resilience. The ages and stages of development of the children in your care (Petty 2009) will determine the extent of the discussions of the stories and the activities that you can do. The books and activities described above can get you started in providing an environment that is filled with protective factors and minimizes risk factors for young children.

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