Why the World Needs Resilient Kids and How to Build Their Bounce

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[***Karen Cairone***](http://ltd.edc.org/people/karen-cairone)*designs resources that build the capacity of early childhood educators, leaders, and parents to promote young children's resilience and that support the use of effective coping mechanisms to handle stress. She is an expert in child and adult mental health and resilience, social and emotional development, and challenging behaviours in young children, product and training design, and training delivery. Currently, Karen is contributing to the EDC-led Center of Excellence for Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation and*[*Home Visiting Collaborative Improvement and Innovation Network*](http://hv-coiin.edc.org/)*. She also designs and conducts trainings on Preventing and Addressing Challenging Behaviours for one of EDC’s joint federally and state funded-projects, the*[*Centre for Early Learning Professionals*](http://center-elp.org/professional-development/)*. In this post, Karen discusses why it is so vital to promote all young children’s resilience and shares simple, yet effective ways that adults can help foster resilience.*

I recently attended a leadership symposium with others in the early childhood field who had been dubbed “Exceptional Emerging Leaders.” As I participated in the events throughout the day, I found myself noting the characteristics of the individuals who were getting their voices heard most often and, in essence, shaping the direction of our work together to advance the field of early childhood. These individuals were often the vocal ones with strong opinions, who used their assertiveness to move their thoughts into actionable next steps. *The New Early Childhood Professional* ([Washington, Gadson, & Amel, 2015](https://www.naeyc.org/store/The-New-Early-Childhood-Professional)), a recent National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) book on early childhood professionals as leaders, refers to the “11 steps to be an architect of change.” Much of the leadership advice (“Be bold!” “Plan ahead!” “Get the word out!”) was evident and in effect in the room that day. Part of our charge before attending this symposium was to take the *Strengths-Finder 2.0™*personal survey ([Rath, 2007](http://strengths.gallup.com/110440/about-strengthsfinder-20.aspx%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)) to determine our top five strengths in relation to our professional characteristics. As the day went on, I began to realize that individuals who stood out the most were ones with strengths in areas such as Activator, Command, Consistency, Deliberative, Focus, Input, Maximizer, Self-Assurance, and Strategic.

Pop back into your early childhood classrooms for a moment. Do you remember the child who was the activator? The one who used command? The one who was strategic? I do. Those were often the children who were viewed as “challenging” by their early childhood teachers. While their behaviour may have been frustrating or exhausting at times, what is exceptionally neat about these types of domineering children is that they also possess the innate ability to be leaders. So, what helps one child with leadership potential go down “a positive path,” while another uses her leadership skills for “less positive ventures”? And, what helps all children cope with life’s adversity and traumas, navigate the day-to-day hassle and transitions we all must learn to adjust to, and avoid getting hung up and stuck when faced with difficult situations?

The answer is amazingly simple…It is about a child’s protective factors. Protective factors are (1) external factors in the environment at home or at school; and (2) internal psychological factors, skills, and characteristics that together moderate the effects of stress, contributing to positive outcomes for the child (Cairone & Mackrain, 2012). The adults in a child’s life serve as major catalysts in helping a child use her leadership potential and access her protective factors as she navigates her world.

Every child has risk factors, but many children, especially those with challenging behaviours, have excess risk, even toxic stress, in their lives. To cope with this stress and risk, these children many times use their survival instincts such as fight, flight, or freeze when they sense an unsafe (or simply, unknown) person approaching or dangerous situation pending. Is it any wonder these children use these challenging survival behaviours at school? These are the very behaviours that [serve as protective mechanisms when they are outside the school walls](http://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ930639).

When a child can draw on his protective factors to overcome risk, he has resilience. Resilience is the ability to bounce back from or cope with life’s difficulties. Resilient children seem to face difficulty with a sturdy disposition. Instead of fight, flight, or freeze, they seem to think, “How can I solve this problem?”

And the good news? Resilience can be taught.

What can *you* do to foster resilience? Below, I share 10 simple, effective strategies that you can use every day to "help build children's bounce."

1)    **Model resilience.**Talk the talk, and walk the walk. Children need to see the adults in their world using healthy coping behaviours. Of course you get frustrated and angry at times. Let children know “I was angry this morning, and you know what? Here is how I handled that strong feeling…” When something challenging happens, take a few deep breaths and tell children, “I am feeling frustrated. I am taking a few deep breaths, and then I will try this again.” The more children see positive examples related to coping and showing respect for others, the more likely they are to use these behaviors themselves ([Derman-Sparks, 2015](https://www.naeyc.org/store/Leading-Anti-Bias-Early-Childhood-Programs%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)).

2)    **Foster healthy relationship skills.**It is extremely hard (impossible?) to teach someone with whom you have no relationship. If there is no trust, there can be no growth. Start small with a child who challenges you. Be sure to have 20 positive interactions a day with that child (some teachers place 20 pennies in one pocket and transfer a penny every time they have a positive interaction with that child). Seek out the child and attempt to build your relationship. Then, when it is time to teach her, you will have a solid basis of trust to work from ([Kaiser & Sklar Rasminsky, 2011](http://www.amazon.com/Challenging-Behavior-Young-Children-Understanding/dp/0132159120)).

3)    **Teach self-awareness.**Some children do not understand why they get upset, lash out, or even shut down. Do not ask them “Why?” Is there really a correct response to “Why did you just hit her?” Instead, draw their attention to their behavior cues (“I see you are clenching your fists,” “I notice your voice has gotten higher,” “I see you getting closer to the door,” etc.). Point out the behaviors they use when things are going well, and when things are not going as well. Often, children need to be more aware of how their own actions affect others. When you narrate these behaviors for children, you help them better understand cause and effect, and the role they play in the process ([Alvord, Zucker, & Grados, 2011](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01609513.2012.656530?journalCode=wswg20)).

4)    **Focus on feelings.**There is a feeling behind almost every behavior. Although we may want to change the behavior to something more appropriate, we *want* children to have a wide range of feelings, even very strong feelings! Ask a child what he is feeling. If he doesn’t know, try to label the feeling for him. Label your own feelings often. Talk about how characters in stories or other children in the classroom or at home are feeling. Play feeling games like matching facial expressions that show different emotions or using mirrors to practice making various facial expressions. The more a child can understand what feelings he is having, the sooner he will be able to recognize feelings in others, and respond appropriately ([Cairone & Mackrain, 2012](https://www.kaplanco.com/product/29021/promoting-resilience-in-preschoolers-2nd-edition?c=17|EA1000" \t "_blank)).

5)    **Lead with strengths.**Each child has strengths. Each child has unique interests and skills. A child who has many chances to use her strengths has more chances to develop confidence and healthy self-esteem. If you have a very active child, be sure there are opportunities for her to lead others and expend her energy. Find ways for children to dig deeper into interest areas, and even teach others (and you!) something new. Make a list of each child’s strengths, and add to it regularly. Refer to this list to point out how she contributes to the positive environment in the classroom, as well as to share the things she does well with her family. Be sure to offer encouragement (recognizing and describing the effort) in lieu of praise (evaluating the outcome). It is hard for a child to misbehave when she is feeling good about herself ([Gartrell, 2012](https://www.naeyc.org/store/education-for-a-civil-society)).

6)    **Provide healthy outlets.**Have some spaces in your classroom for children to retreat to for alone time or even rest time as needed. Have an active area with mats for children who need to throw their bodies around and let off steam. Have art supplies and projects that engage the senses (like pounding clay, driving cars in a sand table, or painting on an easel). Offer a self-serve snack table with healthy options like fruit or low-sugar cereal for children who may not have gotten a healthy breakfast or lunch. Recognize that children, like adults, have a variety of needs during the day. And, when we can find healthy ways to meet these needs, we all have more positive behaviors ([Hyson, 2008](http://www.amazon.com/Enthusiastic-Engaged-Learners-Approaches-Childhood/dp/0807748803)).

7)    **Focus on consistency.** Routines and rituals provide consistency for children, many of whom have inconsistent routines outside of school. Children feel safer when they are doing activities in a similar way, at a similar time each day, with a small set of rules that need to be followed. Chaos and disorganization make most people feel nervous and unsure about what to expect. Make a visual schedule at the child’s eye level (image) and revisit it often. When there is a change in the schedule, provide several reminders to the group, as well as individual children who may need more reassurance. When we provide a consistent approach to routines and transitions in the classroom, we are helping the child feel comforted. A child who feels comfortable is more ready to learn ([Howell & Reinhard, 2015](https://www.naeyc.org/store/rituals-and-traditions)).

8)    **Foster self-regulation.**Self-regulation has two major components: 1) Doing something you know you need to, even if you don’t want to (like washing your hands when the teacher asks you to), and 2) NOT doing something you want to because you understand that behavior has negative consequences (like pushing another child when she takes your toy). Adults can foster self-regulation using a popular strategy known as [FLIP IT ®](http://www.centerforresilientchildren.org/flip-it/). FLIP IT includes these four steps to handling strong emotions in non-hurtful ways:

* Identify **Feelings**.
* Set or remind the child of the **Limit**.
* Ask questions—**Inquire**.
* Offer **Prompts**.

For example: “I see you are getting angry. We use our hands in kind ways. What is another way you could ask for a turn? Could you ask your friend to make a trade with another toy, or, ask how much longer they’d like with the toy and we can set a timer?” ([Sperry, 2011](http://www.centerforresilientchildren.org/preschool/assessments-resources/flip-it-transforming-challenging-behavior/)).

9)    **If you're a teacher, connect with children's families.**Children know when there is dissent between their teacher and parent. When a parent doesn’t trust the teacher, and doesn’t think they care about their child, they are not able to form a connection. This lack of connection leaves a child with inconsistent messages between home and school, and the knowledge that two people she likes don’t really like each other. It is never too late to form a connection with a family. Just like with a child, start small. Reach out more often to share some fun anecdotes about the child, something she said or did that the class enjoyed. Send pictures of the child at play. Ask about things that are important to the family and child. Make a note to follow-up later about a special event in the child’s life. Get good at the everyday chit chat so when something more difficult comes up you need to discuss with a family, they are more willing to receive it and be your partner in coming up with solutions ([Bilmes, 2012](http://www.amazon.com/Beyond-Behavior-Management-Skills-Children/dp/1605540730%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)).

10)  **Be available.**More than anything else, let a child know you are available when he needs you. You are there to listen, hug, play, talk, or just sit nearby in silence. Some days will be harder for children than others, often due to factors out of your control. If you regularly give the message that “I am here for you to help your day go as well as possible,” children will learn that you are a consistent and caring presence in the (sometimes scary and unsure) world ([Dombro, Jablon, & Stetson, 2011](https://www.naeyc.org/store/Powerful-Interactions%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)).

These simple tips are effective, and easily implemented by any adult in a child’s life. Why not you? YOU may very well be the best person in a child’s life to share these life-long, important teachings.

Hang this colorful strip with 10 resilience-building ideas in your classroom or in your home to remind you how you can “build all children’s bounce” every day.

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| Model resilience. | Foster healthy relationship skills. | Teach self-awareness. | Focus on feelings. | Lead with strengths. |
| Provide healthy outlets. | Focus on consistency. | Foster self-regulation. | Connect with families. | Be available. |

Remember, resilience can be learned. And our world needs resilient leaders in its future—leaders that don’t fight, flee, or freeze in the face of adversity, but instead say “How can I solve this problem?”