

# HOT SHEET

## Developing Resiliency In Today's Students

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**Re-sil-i-en-cy** *N.I.* The ability to recover quickly from illness, change, or misfortune; buoyancy.

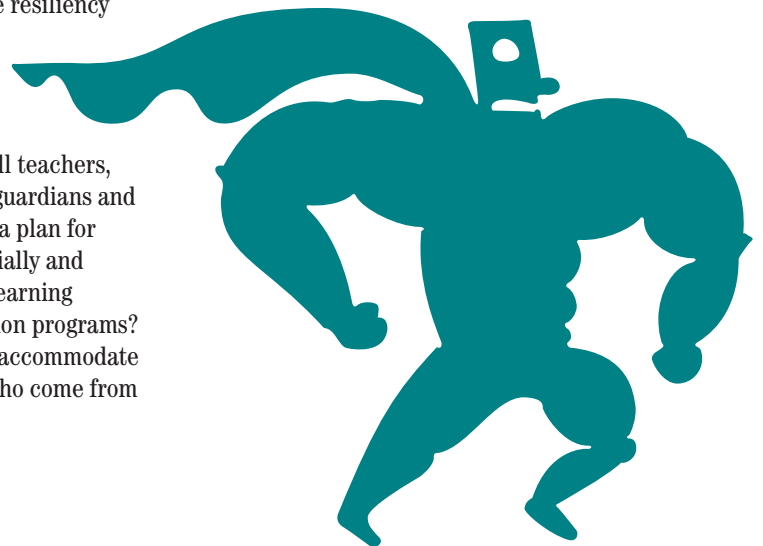
Molly knows how to count from one to 10; she can pick out her favorite letters in the alphabet and loves to have stories read to her. She can even recite many of her books from memory and likes to "read" them to her dolls. She comes from a two-parent family and attends day care three days a week while her mother works a part-time job, her father a full-time job. She lives in Sacramento. She is two years old.

Dustin can count to five; he can write the letter "I" and no others. The court recently placed him in foster care because his single mother had lost the will to get out of bed in the morning and wanted to enroll herself in a 30-day treatment program. She reads at a fifth-grade level. Dustin lives in Sacramento. He is seven years old and is in first grade.

Although Dustin comes from less ideal circumstances than Molly, he can develop the resiliency to overcome the perceived odds and become a productive and successful member of society. At least a part of his future will depend on how the schools he attends meet his needs. Will teachers, administrators, school psychologists, guardians and social service workers meet to lay out a plan for educating this child academically, socially and emotionally? Will he be identified as learning disabled and placed in special education programs? Or, will the school program change to accommodate Dustin and the many other children who come from similar situations?

Today's schooling involves much more than reading, writing and arithmetic. Teachers and administrators must also find ways of managing students whose basic physical and emotional needs are not being met at home. School psychologists can help teachers, administrators, families and students learn methods for fostering resiliency in children like Dustin and all students.

The word "normal" can't really be used to describe many of today's students. Drug abuse, family violence, divorce, remarriage, poverty, unsafe neighborhoods, absent parents and many other precarious predicaments are part of every day life for many kids. In addition to the social problems some kids bring to school, teachers in regular classrooms are dealing with students who may have physical handicaps, learning disabilities or behavioral problems. And teachers are becoming more than teachers; they are at times counselors, social workers, nurses and parent substitutes.



“For some kids, the teacher is the most stable adult influence in their lives,” said Mike Goodman, president of the California Association of School Psychologists. “Teachers should realize their role in a child’s life goes above and beyond dispensing knowledge. It’s an awesome burden. In some respects, teachers are taking the place of parents by modeling how well-adjusted adults act.”

Despite being filled with society’s problems, the classroom is supposed to be a place where children feel safe and secure. Teachers have the Herculean task of educating students and promoting self-efficacy. The classroom should be a setting where students can achieve and build self-esteem.

One way to give children an affirmative view of themselves would be to provide them a positive view of the future, said Debbie Johnson, of the Primary Mental Health Project at the University of Rochester in New York. Teachers, administrators, and school psychologists should not apply this attitude solely toward “at risk” students, but with all students, she says.

“When you complete high school’ and ‘when you go to college’ are good ways to reinforce a positive future for all students,” Johnson said, adding that no child should hear that he or she does not have a chance to succeed.

Researchers continue to confirm the protective power of firm guidance, challenge and stimulation — plus loving support of being respected and of having their strengths and abilities recognized help students succeed. Successful teachers of children from different social and economic backgrounds refuse to label their students “at risk”; they look at each child and see the individual who is inside and communicate this vision back to the child. These teachers are trained to look for children’s strengths and interests and use these as jump-off points for learning. By demanding high expectations these teachers help to develop the self-esteem and self-efficacy found in children who attend highly regarded schools.

There are many routes teachers and schools can take to foster self-efficacy and to build a sense of community in the classroom. Cooperative learning helps foster teamwork rather than competition. Schools are instituting “buddy programs” between older and younger students to instill empathy. And training in conflict resolution skills helps students learn to work out their own problems while bolstering self-image.

Johnson says it is important to nurture students onto a path to resiliency by taking the following steps:

- *Give students a secure setting.* It is difficult to learn when the school or the surrounding community is considered dangerous.
- *Build positive attitudes.* If you tell students enough times they can do something, they’ll eventually believe it.
- *Empower students.* Let them make some decisions, perhaps regarding some of the classroom rules. Let them know they can make a difference.
- *Build age and ability competencies.* Begin with a child’s interests and expand those interests through community visits to the zoo, fire department, local medical clinic, mayor’s office or department store. Use these experiences as a springboard for building vocabulary, writing personal experience stories or journals and generating story math problems. For example, let students share their knowledge by working with younger groups.
- *Build skills to handle life’s stresses.* A school psychologist can help determine an appropriate program for a teacher to build coping skills in his or her students.

During the last decade, research on successful programs for youth at risk of academic failure has clearly demonstrated that high expectations — with concomitant support — is a critical factor in decreasing the number of students who drop out of school and in increasing the number of youth who go on to college. According to Phyllis Hart of the Achievement Council, a California-based advocacy group, when a poor, inner-city school established a college core curriculum, over 65 percent of its graduates went on to higher education — up from 15 percent before the program began. Several students stated that “having one person who believed I could do it” was a major factor in their decision to attend college.

Teachers and administrators should try not to give up, even if some students seem hopeless. School psychologists are willing to offer teachers advice, make referrals and intervene in emergency situations. “Kids have remarkable resilience. They can overcome adversity just because of one caring adult in their lives. You can be that person,” Goodman said.