TeachingStrategies®

Building Children's Social–Emotional Competence

Resiliency and Protective Factors

Resiliency refers to a person's ability to bounce back from stress, adversity, failure, challenges, or even trauma. Resilient people are not protected from life's hardships—they do face difficult times—but they have the tools to survive and rise above adversity. They can meet life's challenges and use their social–emotional skills and positive outlook to do well. Children's resiliency is nurtured over time through relationships with caring adults, community and family support, and help to develop specific skills such as adaptability and social competence. Table 1 shows the characteristics of a resilient child.

Protective factors help children develop characteristics of resiliency and overcome challenging and even traumatic situations. The most important protective factor in a child's life is the consistent presence of a caring adult. Ideally, this is the child's parent or primary caregiver, but another family member, a teacher, or other trusted adult can play this role.

Protective Factors
- Nurturing, caring adults
- A safe, predictable environment
- Clear norms promoting prosocial, healthy, appropriate behavior
- Involvement in decision-making
- Opportunities for participation and meaningful involvement
- High expectations for success
- Recognition and reinforcement of positive behavior

Teachers can increase children's protective factors by maintaining a safe and predictable classroom environment and schedule, creating clear norms and rules for the classroom community, encouraging children to help make decisions for themselves and the class, and planning experiences that support meaningful involvement.

Children also benefit when teachers have high expectations for their success. These expectations need to be developmentally appropriate and based on individual children's social–emotional skills. Expectations should also grow over time as children's skills progress. For example, at the beginning of the year and at the beginning of the curriculum, some children may not be able to express their feelings in words or manage their strong feelings. By the

Table 1. Characteristics of a Resilient Child			
Social Competence	**Problem-Solving Skills**	**Autonomy**	**Sense of Future and Purpose**
• Good communication and expression of feelings • Positive relationships with others • A sense of humor • Empathy and caring • An ability to see different sides and ideas • Adaptability • Healthy coping skills	• Decision-making skills • Ability to think flexibly • Ability to try different solutions	• Self-control • Self-discipline • A clear sense of separate identity • Independence • Self-esteem • Ability to exert control over one's environment	• Goal-oriented outlook • Persistence • A focus on achievement and education • Hope for a bright future • A sense of faith • Healthy expectations

end of the curriculum, many of them will master these skills. While considering expectations for each child, teachers should be mindful of their own biases to ensure that they do not impact their expectations. For example, girls are often seen as being calmer or more mature than boys. This bias causes people to hold girls to higher behavioral expectations than boys, which has a negative impact on the children and the dynamics of the classroom community.

Additionally, it is important for teachers to intentionally recognize and reinforce children's positive behaviors. When using positive reinforcement, teachers need to be mindful to not rely on praise or personal opinion. For example, if a child chooses to go to the calm-down place when he is feeling frustrated that his paper tore while he was painting, the teacher could say, "You were feeling frustrated, so you went to the calm-down place to calm down," instead of "I like the way you went to the calm-down area to calm down." Removing praise and opinion from recognition allows children to develop their own internal sense of pride and draws their attention to positive choices they make throughout the day.

> **High expectations and reinforcement and recognition communicate several important messages.**
> - "I believe in you."
> - "You have what it takes to control yourself, to be kind, and to get what you want in socially acceptable ways."
> - "You are capable of learning and displaying positive, caring, socially productive behaviors."
> - "I expect and will see to it that this classroom will be a safe and caring environment that supports independence and shows respect."

Teacher-Guide Approach

Al's Pals™ uses the "teacher-guide approach" to foster children's resiliency and build their protective factors. This approach invites teachers to give up some control so children can gain control. For example, instead of providing children with all the answers or stepping in to solve their problems, teachers guide children to think, feel, and make choices for themselves. Over time, this approach results in children feeling empowered, able to identify and manage their own feelings and find solutions to their problems.

Advantages of being a "guide" in the classroom include the following.
- Reducing teachers' over-involvement—rather than stepping in, the teacher steps back
- Children becoming more responsible and taking ownership of their problems
- Teachers modeling the characteristics they want to see in the children
- Teachers and children feeling less stress
- Alleviating teachers' burden of "having all the answers"
- Helping all children feel included and welcomed
- Teachers spending more time teaching and less time disciplining
- Teachers spending less time on power struggles

An effective guide enhances the experience of the person being guided. To be an effective guide, teachers need to focus on not just what they do, but how they do it. Guide styles describe how teachers behave with children to help maintain positive and caring relationships during challenging situations, when discussing difficult topics, and throughout daily interactions. When teachers incorporate being a guide into their teaching practice, they shift many responsibilities from themselves to the children while using guide styles to remain calm, approachable sources of information.

> **Guide Styles**
> - **Neutral:** open-minded, does not assume to know what another is thinking or feeling based on their own thoughts or feelings
> - **Calm:** does not become overly emotional
> - **Approachable**: friendly, open to conversation and questions
> - **Knowledgeable**: a source of information, stays at level of audience
> - **Attends to the present**: stays focused on the moment, not on past behavior
> - **Understanding**: empathizes and validates
> - **Nonjudgmental**: deals with the behavior without judging the person; does not label people as "good" or "bad"
> - **Respectful:** demonstrates respect through speech and body language

Guide Skills

There are specific skills teachers use when they act as guides to build children's protective factors. Implementing these "guide skills" helps teachers create an environment that nurtures children's resiliency, reduces risk, and creates optimal outcomes for children and their families. Guide skills describe what teachers do and say as they interact with children throughout the day.

Guide skills work in tandem with guide styles. Guide skills describe what teachers do; guide styles describe

how they do it. For guide skills to be effective, teachers must use related guide styles in their interactions with children. For example, a child arrives at school on Monday morning and tells Ms. Gonzalez that the police came to her house over the weekend because her parents were arguing. Ms. Gonzalez uses guide styles to remain neutral, nonjudgmental, and understanding while using guide skills to listen to the child and validate her feelings and experiences: "Thank you for sharing. How did you feel when that happened? Do you want to talk about it some more?"

Table 2. Alignment of Guide Skills to Protective Factors That Build Resiliency Traits		
Guide Skills	**Protective Factors**	**Resiliency Traits**
Listening	• Caring adult	• Communication skills • Self-esteem
Facilitating brainstorming	• Meaningful involvement • High expectations	• Flexible thinking • Acceptance of differences
Facilitating the identification and expression of feelings	• Caring adult	• Communication skills • Empathy and caring
Validating feelings and experiences	• Safe, predictable environment • Caring adult	• Self-control • Healthy coping
Serving as a role model	• High expectations • Recognize positive behavior	• Communications skills • Positive relationships • Empathy and caring
Communicating clear norms	• Clear norms	• Decision-making • Healthy coping
Responding to sensitive issues	• Safe, predictable environment • Caring adult	• Self-control • Healthy coping • Adaptability • Hope
Delegating decision-making **Guiding problem-solving**	• High expectations • Meaningful involvement • Involve in decisions	• Self-control • Try different solutions • Persistence • Goal-oriented