



South Southwest (HHS Region 6)

MHTTC

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Fostering Resilience: Responding to the Needs of School-Age Children

The coronavirus pandemic has disrupted social, political, and economic systems of communities, the impact of which is felt in the mental health of children and families worldwide. Pandemics, while typically defined by scale, infectiousness, and geographic reach, have other aspects that can make them unique. Such is the case with the coronavirus, in which the method of preventing and mitigating the spread of the virus – social distancing – poses distinct challenges to educators, school-based mental health providers, and the school-age children and families they serve.

Schools serve a critical function in supporting the resilience of school-aged children. The effects of social distancing include disruption in school, interrupted social connections, and upending of regular routines for children and families. In addition, families may also be experiencing parental unemployment, increased financial instability, and food insecurity. It is important to recognize that for some school-age children, lack of the school structure and family stressors will make social distancing more destabilizing. In sum, the school's social networks and supports that contribute to the resilience of school-age children (students) are more fragile than before the pandemic.

Mental Health Considerations

Some students may be experiencing increased uncertainty, anxiety, lack of control, and a sense of loss due to the closure of schools. The loss of these social connections and daily routines, which provide opportunities for connection, as well as emotional, social and academic skills, can threaten students' coping and resilience. Some may experience this as loss and exhibit grief, while others may experience increased anxiety over the uncertainty and loss of control. Still others may experience this as (re)traumatization and have trouble sleeping and managing their emotions, while others may feel further isolated, lonely, and depressed. These responses can happen at various points as a student navigates the stress and complex, compounding factors associated with the pandemic and these added stressors may exacerbate existing mental health conditions.

Defining Resilience

Resilience has been defined as the process of “bouncing back,” or adapting in the face of adversity, trauma, or significant sources of stress.ⁱ Adversity exists and can take many forms, such as in the social, emotional, and financial impacts associated with a crisis or this pandemic. Resilience research indicates that these circumstances don't have to lead to poor outcomes. Even in the face of adversity, control can be exercised in some aspects of life; people can change their perspective and potentially grow from these challenges. Resilience not only helps one bounce back, it can also facilitate empowerment and emotional growth.

Resilience is not a fixed trait or factor that either exists or doesn't exist in a person, but is rather a set of behaviors, thoughts and actions that when practiced and used intentionally can be strengthened. These are skills that can be learned, practiced, and reinforced during challenging times, when students feel supported by caring adults.

The Role of Inclusion and Resilience

Students and their families will experience the pandemic differently depending on their intersecting identities, such as race, gender identity, ethnic background, socioeconomic status, religion, sexual orientation, physical abilities, and others, as well as their support network. Health inequity research indicates communities of color are more likely to experience the negative impacts of a public

health crisis, due to existing systemic inequalities.ⁱⁱ In fostering and supporting the resilience of students, it is critical to create and sustain an inclusive response that takes into account their lived experience.ⁱⁱⁱ

School professionals should consider the following circumstances:

- The student may reside in a home where there are immunocompromised and older adults, creating additional stress and concern for the health and wellbeing of their family members.
- The student may have a family member who has tested positive for the virus and may be reluctant to share this information with people outside of the home.
- Adults in the home may express the stress of the pandemic in a way that may activate the student’s anxiety.
- The family may be experiencing a lack of resources and access to wellness activities. The family’s focus on meeting basic needs may interfere with meeting educational demands.
- Students may react to stress from the pandemic in ways that may not seem like themselves. Some reactions are more visible, like acting out, arguing, and disobeying rules. Other reactions are more internal and not as visible, such as worrying more, withdrawing from others, feeling sad or irritable, or sleeping and eating more or less.
- Students may have additional responsibilities for their family, such as caring for younger siblings, while also needing to meet their own educational needs.

Fostering Resilience through Connection

The American Psychological Association reports that a “primary factor in resilience is having caring and supportive relationships within and outside the family. Relationships that create love and trust, provide role models and offer encouragement and reassurance, help bolster a person’s resilience.^{iv}” A student’s connections with stable adults and role models at home, in their schools, and communities, can provide the security to develop creative solutions.

Ways that this connection with students can be fostered include:

- Reach out by phone, email or videoconference in a way that meets the student and family where they are and considers their needs, “walking with” and being open to learning from their experience.
- Listen to how the pandemic is affecting the student and their family. Explore whether the pandemic has changed or impacted their ability to meet social, emotional, and basic needs.
- Evaluate the student and family’s sense of safety, listening for uneasiness in sharing information, background cues, and their ability to live, laugh, and love openly and safely in their home. Some questions that might help assess for safety and privacy include:
 - *Do you feel comfortable talking where you are?*
 - *Do you have a place you can go for privacy?*
 - *Do you want me to call back at a different time?*
- Strive to be consistent and regular in your contacts with students, as predictability and routine helps to strengthen trust and connection.
- Recognize and praise healthy coping strategies, as this strengthens your connection to the student and establishes trust.

While telehealth may not be available, and access and comfort in providing telehealth may be limited, assessing for safety, listening non-judgmentally, and reframing/resetting healthy expectations under the circumstances can go a long way in developing consistent communication with an adult in their lives.

Fostering Resilience by Increasing a Sense of Control & Empowerment

The uncertainty created by disasters and pandemics can disrupt a person’s sense of control and autonomy. For school-age children, they may also sense that their parents, teachers, and other important adults in their lives are unable to control the situation and are not making the decisions that impact their daily lives, such as whether they can see friends or go to school.

Outside the structure of the classroom, teachers and school staff can make adjustments to help students regain a sense of control, supporting growth and resilience through some of the following:

- Provide students with opportunities to choose activities or assignments when possible. This could include allowing the class to choose among a list of learning activities, the order of educational topics, or other aspects of the virtual learning experience.
- Support the student in finding the language to express or make sense (or understand or make meaning) of their feelings and experiences. Students have been adapting to conditions they are not accustomed to and may struggle or not have the words to describe their feelings. Having the ability to identify, express and manage feelings increases a student's knowledge and ability to navigate their world.
 - Name feelings to help the student develop an emotional vocabulary. For younger students, connecting feelings with colors or weather can build connections and normalize their responses. This empowers them with a language for their feelings.
 - Provide options and creative outlets around how those feelings can be expressed (through words in journaling or writing stories and poetry, drawing and art, dancing, scrapbooking, making music, etc.).

Fostering Resilience through Self-Efficacy and Coping

Having self-efficacy (belief and confidence in one's abilities) and engaging in positive coping can support and promote resilience. Self-efficacy reflects belief or confidence in one's ability to succeed in specific situations.^v Coping, on the other hand, is behavior that manages the stresses and overwhelming feelings that come with tough situations. The challenges that students face during the pandemic provide an opportunity to learn new coping skills and build or strengthen their sense of their ability to manage and cope.

- Encourage students to continue to engage in areas of strength, such as physical activity, music, or drawing, which can increase feelings of competence and confidence. Continue to look for opportunities to recognize and praise new areas of learning for the student.
 - Ask students to engage in non-academic activities that can instill confidence in their abilities, such as journaling or practicing naming their feelings.
- Encourage students to participate in activities that can help them find purpose in their environment, such as connecting to something bigger. This can support their development of self-awareness and make them feel as though they are contributing. This can include simple tasks such as gardening, helping make meals, or caring for a pet.
- Emphasize and provide guidance to students and families on wellness practices that are readily accessible. This can include taking a walk or spending time outdoors, scheduling calls with family and friends, or reading a fun book.
- Listen for and ask questions about the student's wellness and coping, using the eight dimensions of wellness (physical, intellectual, emotional, social, spiritual, vocational, financial, and environmental).^{vi}

Fostering Resilience through Self-Compassion

Self-compassion is the opposite of self-judgment. It brings acceptance to our experience, acceptance of what is happening, as well as our reaction to it. Self-compassion activates the care-giving system and moves us to act, care, and protect. This can facilitate pro-social behaviors linked to resilience.^{vii}

- Practice and model self-compassion while encouraging students and families to have a more compassionate view of their current circumstance.
 - The reality is that the pandemic has been a stressful and uncertain time. Acknowledging and observing this experience for what it is without judgement is a way to practice and model compassion.
 - Reminding students and their families that they are not alone in this experience, that their responses (grief, anger, sadness, guilt, frustration) are real and also experienced by others.
 - Most importantly, encourage students and their families to be kind and understanding to each other. Encourage them to ask, what can I do for myself now and what can I do for my parent/brother/sister?

Fostering resilience in response to the coronavirus pandemic requires school-based mental health providers and educators to work together to support the connection, empowerment, coping, self-efficacy and self-compassion of the student and family. This will require re-establishing or re-envisioning an environment where the student can safely practice control by normalizing and developing a language for feelings, making meaning of the situation, and resetting routines to meet new realities.

Additional Resources

- [Greater Good Science Center at UC Berkeley](#) turns scientific research into stories, tips, and tools for a happier life and a more compassionate society. Through articles, videos, quizzes, and podcasts, Greater Good bridges the gap between scientific journals and people's daily lives, particularly for parents, educators, business leaders, and health care professionals.
- [UC San Diego Center for Mindfulness \(CFM\)](#) is a multi-faceted program of professional training, education, research, and outreach intended to further the practice and integration of mindfulness and compassion into all aspects of society.
- [Child Mind Institute](#) provides daily tips and articles for families.
- [Mindful Schools](#) promotes mindfulness in schools. Provides free online mindfulness classes for school-age children and courses for educators in implementing mindfulness in schools.
- [Staying Resilient during Covid-19](#) contains videos and brief guidance on a range of topics to support resilience.
- [The National Child Traumatic Stress Network](#) provides information for parents and caregivers about infectious disease outbreaks in your community. Knowing important information about the outbreak and learning how to be prepared can reduce stress and help calm likely anxieties.

References

ⁱ <https://www.apa.org/topics/resilience>

ⁱⁱ National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine; Health and Medicine Division; Board on Population Health and Public Health Practice; Committee on Community-Based Solutions to Promote Health Equity in the United States; Baciu A, Negussie Y, Geller A, et al., editors. Communities in Action: Pathways to Health Equity. Washington (DC): National Academies Press (US); 2017 Jan 11. 3, The Root Causes of Health Inequity. Available from: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK425845/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://thinkculturalhealth.hhs.gov/clas>

^{iv} American Psychological Association, Task Force on Resilience and Strength in Black Children and Adolescents. (2008). Resilience in African American children and adolescents: A vision for optimal development. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/pi/cyf/resilience.html>

^v Bandura, A. (1997). Self-Efficacy: The exercise of control. New York, NY: W. H. Freeman.

^{vi} <https://store.samhsa.gov/product/Creating-a-Healthier-Life-/SMA16-4958>

^{vii} <https://self-compassion.org/>