

Fast Facts

1. In essence, resilience means being able to bounce back from difficult times and cope well with challenges.¹
2. Factors that promote resilience among adolescents include having caring relationships with adults, an easygoing disposition, cognitive skills, confidence, and strong internal values.^{2,3}
3. Adolescents who are resilient may be better able to avoid risky behaviors, such as violence, substance use, and adolescent pregnancy, than are other adolescents.⁴
4. Adolescents who are resilient also find ways to reduce the negative effects of stress on their lives, such as getting regular physical exercise, avoiding substance abuse, and practicing relaxation techniques.⁵
5. School- or community-based programs can teach problem-solving and social skills that can improve resilience among adolescents.⁶

Positive Mental Health: Resilience

By David Murphey, Ph.D., Megan Barry, B.A, and Brigitte Vaughn, M.S.

As is true for physical health, mental health encompasses more than the absence of disorders. Researchers have considered a number of dimensions of positive mental health, one of which is “resilience.”

Resilience has been defined as “the ability of an individual to function competently in the face of adversity or stress.” An adolescent who is resilient is likely to enter adulthood with a good chance of coping well—even if he or she has experienced difficult circumstances in life. This *Adolescent Health Highlight* presents key research findings on characteristics that are associated with resilience; describes program strategies that promote resilience; discusses links between resilience and avoidance of risk-taking behaviors; and provides helpful resources on the topic of resilience.

Characteristics of resilience

An adolescent who is resilient has an advantage when it comes to meeting the challenges and responsibilities of adulthood, even if he or she has experienced circumstances such as poverty, health problems, or strained family relationships.¹

In the context of mental health, resilience can be viewed as the ability to handle stress positively. Adolescents’ stress can come from multiple directions—school; relationships (with friends, romantic partners, and parents); hormonal and physical changes associated with adolescence; impending decisions about college and career; pressures to conform or to engage in risky behaviors; family financial problems; dangerous neighborhoods; and more.

Resilience can also be viewed as the product of the stressors an adolescent is currently bearing; the adolescent’s genetic temperament; his or her competence both for independence and for seeking help when appropriate; and the social support provided by family members and others.¹

Research has identified a number of characteristics of adolescents that are associated with resilience. Among these characteristics are having:²

- One or more adults providing caring support;
- An appealing, sociable, easygoing disposition;
- Good thinking skills (“intelligence” as traditionally defined, but also judgment and social skills);
- One or more talents (things a person does really well);
- Belief in oneself and trust in one’s ability to make decisions;³ and
- Religiosity or spirituality.⁷

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Relationships with caring adults. Parents are usually the most important adults in adolescents' lives.⁸ Parents who maintain open communication with their adolescent—and support their adolescent's growing independence—also promote the young person's self-worth.⁹ However, adolescents do not always want advice. In light of this reality, some research suggests that parents establish ongoing communication and discuss solutions rather than deliver lectures. Thus, providing reassurance, encouragement, and support can be more useful approaches for parents to take with their adolescents than offering unsolicited advice. In contrast, it is not helpful if parents respond to their adolescent's concerns by minimizing what the young person is feeling or by saying "you'll get over it."¹⁰

Parenting practices—as well as parents' own mental health—have an influence on adolescents' emotional well-being. Many parents strive to promote their child's competence or achievement, which can boost the child's self-esteem. But putting pressure on a child to achieve may also cause stress if he or she perceives parents' efforts as overbearing.¹¹ Parents can support adolescents' participation in a variety of healthy activities—academics, but also sports and social pastimes. Such participation can help adolescents relieve stress, as well as help them develop stress management and conflict resolution skills.⁶ Adolescents whose parents are actively involved in their education are also more likely to be resilient.¹²

Adolescents who have positive relationships with adults outside their families also experience mental health benefits: they feel more supported, are more socially expressive, and are less likely to be depressed than are adolescents who lack such relationships.¹³ Adolescents who have these caring adults in their lives are also more likely to be resilient.¹⁴

Disposition. Adolescents who bring a good-natured disposition to their interactions with others seem to be more likely to develop resilience, as do those who take on reasonable levels of independence while also being able to ask for help when needed. These adolescents are probably more likely to develop supportive relationships with others, which further builds their resilience.^{1,2}

Relationship skills/social competence. The ability to apply problem-solving skills to interpersonal problems or conflicts, to show empathy for the feelings of others, and to voluntarily help others, are additional hallmarks of positive development. Adolescents with good intimacy skills—that is, those who are able to be emotionally close to another individual—are also more likely to be resilient.¹³ Many social skills can be taught; many of the effective approaches involve adolescents leading activities or partnering with peers.⁶

Emotional self-regulation. The concept of "emotional intelligence" recently has also gained recognition.¹⁵ While the concept generally encompasses more than what is typically meant by resilience or positive mental health, it does include managing one's emotions, which can be especially important to adolescent well-being. In response, schools increasingly are incorporating social-emotional learning into their programming. Doing so can involve direct teaching of skills to recognize and regulate one's emotions, and/or schoolwide initiatives that focus on increasing supportive relationships among students and adults. Such efforts have been spurred, in part, by evidence showing that being able to manage one's emotions, and having supportive relationships with adults, contribute to students' academic success, as well as to their adopting positive social attitudes and behaviors.^{16,17}

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Cognitive skills. Intelligence, good judgment, and problem-solving skills seem to help many adolescents get through stressful times.² Intellectual abilities may make it easier for some adolescents to generate multiple, or more effective, solutions to problems.

Talents. Having one or more things one can do well, can take pride in, and can share with others seems to be another factor that promotes resilience among adolescents. Such activities can include hobbies, athletics, performing arts, and computer technology.^{1,2}

Confidence and “inner-directedness.” Children and young adolescents who are resilient are more likely to have an “internal locus of control,” which encompasses confidence (belief in oneself and one’s powers or abilities) and “inner-directedness” (trust in one’s own decisions and being able to act on them.) That is, these adolescents see themselves as being able to influence outcomes, not just as the passive recipients of “fate.”³ Having an optimistic outlook also seems to be related to positive mental health. In one recent study, adolescents who were rated as having a more “optimistic thinking style” were much less likely to be or to get depressed.¹⁸

TABLE 1: How adolescents can help themselves

Adolescents can reduce stress, and promote resilience and other aspects of positive mental health with a number of strategies:

- Get regular exercise (e.g., yoga, running, martial arts, team or individual sports)
- Eat regular meals
- Avoid using excessive caffeine (coffee, tea, soft drinks, energy drinks, etc.)
- Avoid illegal drugs, alcohol, and tobacco
- Learn relaxation techniques (e.g., deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, meditation)
- Develop assertiveness skills (e.g., how politely but firmly to say “no,” or to state one’s feelings)
- Rehearse and practice responses to stressful situations
- Break down large tasks into smaller, more attainable tasks
- Learn to recognize and reduce negative self-talk. Challenge negative thoughts about oneself with alternative neutral or positive thoughts
- Avoid demanding perfection from oneself or others; instead, learn to feel good about doing a competent or “good enough” job
- Take a break from stressful activities or situations. Engage in a hobby, listen to music, or spend time with a pet
- Build a network of friends who can help one to cope in positive ways

Source: American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry. (2006). *Facts for families: Helping teenagers with stress*.

Religiosity or spirituality. Most major religions advance the idea that spiritual development (e.g., one’s relationship with God, or some higher power; a sense of the sacred) is at least one route to developing positive mental health.¹⁹ Membership in religious organizations can also provide social support and caring relationships.

For some adolescents, their spirituality takes the form of participation in religion. Research that looks specifically at adolescents is relatively sparse when it comes to validating the connection between religious involvement and positive mental health. However, a nationally representative

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survey of 12th graders, conducted in 2002, found that those students who identified themselves as more religious (as measured by the importance of religion in their lives, and their attendance at religious services) had higher self-esteem and more positive attitudes toward life than did their peers who were less religious.⁷ When followed into early adulthood (18 to 23 years old), those still reporting regular attendance and an important role in their lives for religious faith, were significantly less likely to be depressed or to feel that life is meaningless, and to have a stronger sense of purpose.²⁰ Regular attendance at religious services has been found to reduce the risk of depression.²¹

Program strategies that promote resilience

A number of formal programs have been established to help adolescents develop coping skills. Some of these programs target specific groups of high-risk adolescents (such as those exposed to previous trauma, or those with a diagnosed mental health disorder), whereas others have a more universal application.²² Rigorous evaluations have identified several programs that are effective at promoting adolescents' interpersonal skills and their abilities to manage their emotions and behaviors. These programs include both school-based and community-based interventions. Among the most successful approaches were activities that involve peers as leaders or partners in learning.⁶

Community-level characteristics also play a role in fostering and maintaining resilience.²² Such characteristics include neighborhood supports and services for families—both informal (neighbor to neighbor) and formal (public and private programs); community conditions (safety, economic vitality); and community standards around looking out for others, acceptable public behavior, and valuing young people.⁴

Links between resilience and avoidance of risk-taking behaviors

Some research suggests that resilient adolescents may be in a better position to avoid risky behaviors, such as violence, substance use, and adolescent pregnancy, than are other adolescents.²³ Adolescents who participated in evidence-based resilience-building programs, particularly those that also involve parents, showed decreases in problems with anger and aggression, in levels of perceived stress, in susceptibility to peer pressure, and in alcohol and illicit drug use, compared with adolescents who did not participated in such programs.⁴

Resources

The Child Trends DataBank includes brief summaries of well-being indicators, including several that are related to resilience:

- Participation in school athletics: <http://www.childtrendsdatabank.org/?q=node/367>
- Participation in school music or other performing arts: <http://www.childtrendsdatabank.org/?q=node/152>
- Religiosity: <http://www.childtrendsdatabank.org/?q=node/145>
- Religious service attendance: <http://www.childtrendsdatabank.org/?q=node/146>
- Substance-free youth: <http://www.childtrendsdatabank.org/?q=node/141>
- Vigorous physical activity: <http://www.childtrendsdatabank.org/?q=node/134>
- Volunteering: <http://www.childtrendsdatabank.org/?q=node/144>

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Resources for schools about improving school connectedness are a particularly promising approach to enhancing resilience.

The Childs Trends [LINKS](#) (Lifecourse Interventions to Nurture Kids Successfully) database summarizes evaluations of out-of-school time programs that work (or not) to enhance children's development. The LINKS Database is user-friendly and directed especially to policy makers, program providers, and funders.

- Programs related to academic motivation/self-concept/expectations/engagement can be found by selecting those boxes under mental education.
- Programs related to social skills/life skills and self-esteem/self-concept can be found by selecting those boxes under social/emotional health.
- Evaluations of programs proven to work (or not) for improving conflict resolution, interpersonal, relationship-building, problem-solving, and self-regulation skills are summarized in a fact sheet [What works for promoting and enhancing positive social skills: Lessons from experimental evaluations of programs and interventions](#).

Selected resources include:

- Findyouthinfo.gov is a federal government Web site that has information on a number of youth-related topics, particularly those that are relevant to strengthening youth-serving programs. Among featured topics is positive youth development (<http://www.findyouthinfo.gov/youth-topics/positive-youth-development>).
- Resources for schools about improving school connectedness (students' feeling that adults in their school care about them as individuals, as well as learners), are a particularly promising approach to enhancing resilience (<http://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/adolescenthealth/pdf/connectedness.pdf>).
- The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services' (SAMHSA's) Center for Mental Health Services provides resources on how parents, mental health providers, schools, and communities can promote resilience in childhood and adolescence (<http://store.samhsa.gov/shin/content/SVP07-0186/SVP07-0186.pdf>).

The CDC's BAM! Body and Mind Web site for children and younger adolescents has information on dealing with stress and anxiety in a healthy way.

In addition, health professionals, educators, and others can direct adolescents and their families to a number of federal resources:

- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC's) child development fact sheets provide information and tips for parents on mental health changes in early adolescence (<http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/childdevelopment/positiveparenting/adolescence.html>) and middle to older adolescence (<http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/childdevelopment/positiveparenting/adolescence2.html>).
- Girlshealth.gov, a Web site for adolescent females, has helpful tips on ways to build self-esteem, dealing with change, and feelings (<http://www.girlshealth.gov/>). This site also features resources for parents and educators.
- The CDC's BAM! Body and Mind Web site for children and younger adolescents has information on dealing with stress and anxiety in a healthy way (<http://www.bam.gov/>). This site also features resources for parents and educators.

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