



“I Can Do That!”

Fostering Resilience in Young Children

Vicki S. Collet

Mrs. Durkin’s kindergarten classroom is full of busy learners. Klaus makes a birthday card for his classmate, saying the words aloud, stretching out the sounds as he writes. Santos is at the SmartBoard and the audio is not working; he turns the volume knob, but no sound is emitted. Next, he removes and then reinserts the audio cord, smiling as the music begins playing. Gracie reads aloud carefully, noticing when she makes a mistake and stopping to reread and correct herself. By responding proactively when confronted with problems during learning, these students are exhibiting resilience. Their actions match their language, as Mrs. Durkin has taught them to say and feel “I can do that!”

Classrooms that foster resilience often share a key feature: children are not afraid to make mistakes (Martin & Marsh 2008). There is a strong culture of inquiry and an atmosphere reflecting a willingness to engage in trial and error. Because learning requires experimenting and facing unknowns, fostering resilience with a flexible, buoyant classroom environment enhances students' growth.

Resilient students understand that changes and challenges bring opportunities. They view mistakes as a chance to learn, accepting that failing often precedes succeeding (Seligman 2007) and recognizing that effort develops knowledge and skill. Rather than believing that success depends solely or even primarily on innate talent, they recognize that success largely depends on effort (Dweck 2002). Resilient children see difficulties as temporary setbacks; they focus on what they can do.

In contrast, children who are less resilient tend to see failure as permanent, pervasive, and out of their control (Seligman 2011). Such students usually fear making mistakes, which they associate with humiliation or disappointment (Goldstein & Brooks 2013). Because of this fear, they may choose what to do in the classroom based on how successful they think they will be. If they do not feel certain that they will succeed, they might avoid—rather than embrace—challenges. During class, children who are less resilient might not participate because they worry about what others will think if they give an incorrect answer. Viewing their performance as a measure of their value and potential, they may choose to forgo a learning opportunity rather than risk being embarrassed.

Teachers can help students overcome their fears, tackle challenges, and increase resilience. Learning experiences that build resilience create opportunities for students to correct errors and build understanding. Teachers can set the stage for resilience as they design the physical space of the classroom and plan for instruction.

Learning Experiences that Increase Resilience

Let's return to Mrs. Durkin's kindergarten classroom, where she planned reading and writing instruction that builds resilience along with literacy. Mrs. Durkin's resilient environment had an array of components, ranging from providing resources to emphasizing the learning process.

What Is Resilience?

Some educators may use different terms (e.g., persistence, flexibility) to describe the set of qualities that this article labels as resilience. The American Psychological Association (n.d.) provides a helpful definition and perspective:

Resilience is the process of adapting well in the face of adversity. Resilience is not a trait that people either have or do not have. It involves behaviors, thoughts, and actions that can be learned and developed in anyone.

Nurturing this trait at an early age is crucial to building lifelong learners.

Providing Resources

Collaboratively creating and encouraging students to use classroom resources, such as process charts, word walls, and letter-sound cards, engenders problem-solving attitudes. For example, a chart created by Mrs. Durkin's class, "Help for Writing," included a list (with accompanying visuals) of resources for writing: ask a friend, word wall, letter cards, My Word Bank (each child's file box of words), posters, and finally, Mrs. Durkin. Although Mrs. Durkin's name had originally appeared at the top of the list, after the class brainstormed so many other resources, they decided together that they could move her to the bottom of the list!

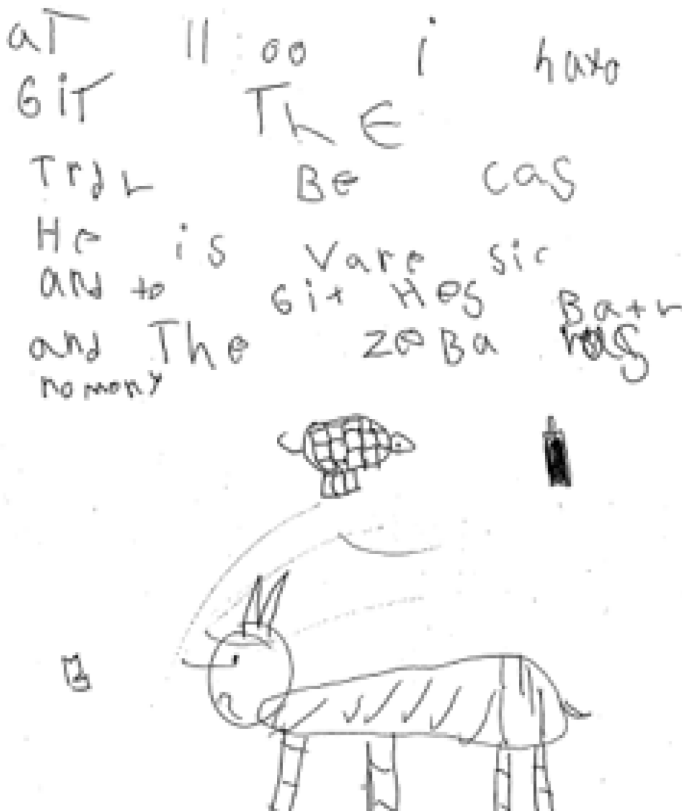
Helping Children Set Goals

Having children set short-term goals is another avenue for increasing resilience. When teachers provide the support students need to develop and achieve these goals, they help students recognize that success requires effort and is incremental. In Mrs. Durkin's room, students set personal goals about how much writing they would do. Allison showed growth toward this goal. Early in the school year, Allison's narratives focused on her drawings, to which she had added just a few words. Over time, her writing stamina increased, and she was pleased when her stories filled the whole page. This experience helped her see the connection between effort and outcome in achieving aspirations. Resilient children believe that they can attain their personal goals (Zolkoski & Bullock 2012).

Valuing Effort

When teachers value children's efforts, they foster resilience. In Mrs. Durkin's classroom, making an attempt was prized over perfection. When students wrote, for example, they were encouraged to include the sounds they heard in a word so they could express their ideas using words that they had not yet learned to spell. At the same time, to help children gradually become both expressive and accurate writers, Mrs. Durkin also provided letter-sound cards and supported students in using them. Although she had made these cards available from the beginning of the year, Mrs. Durkin highlighted the features of the cards (e.g., picture, letter, and other possible spellings) throughout the year to draw students' attention to how the cards might be used during reading and writing.

This combination of providing resources and valuing effort over perfection allowed Siobhán to unabashedly include the word *nomony* (pneumonia) in her writing at the zoo center (see left). While Siobhán was a long way from learning



Books that Help Build Resiliency in Children Ages 5 to 8

Amazing Grace

By Mary Hoffman, illustrated by Caroline Binch (1991)

Although a classmate tells Grace that she cannot play Peter Pan in the school play because she is black, Grace discovers that she can do anything she sets her mind to.

Bully

By Laura Vaccaro Seeger (2013)

A little bull discovers that he has been a big bully.

DeShawn Days

By Tony Medina, illustrated by R. Gregory Christie (2001)

In this uplifting story told in verse, a young boy living in the inner city projects tells about his hopes, fears, and dreams.

Fred Stays with Me!

By Nancy Coffelt, illustrated by Tricia Tusa (2007)

A child describes how she lives sometimes with her mother and sometimes with her father, but her dog is her constant companion.

The Matchbox Diary/El diario de las cajas de fósforos

By Paul Fleischman, illustrated by Bagram Ibatoulline (2013)

Follow a girl's perusal of her great-grandfather's collection of matchboxes holding mementos that document his journey from Italy to a new country.

Monday, Wednesday, and Every Other Weekend

By Karen Stanton (2014)

Although Henry enjoys the time he spends at his mother's apartment and his father's house, his dog, Pomegranate, gets confused about which place is home.

The Money We'll Save

By Brock Cole (2011)

In nineteenth-century New York City, when Pa brings home a young turkey in hopes of saving money on their Christmas dinner, his family faces all sorts of trouble and expense in their tiny apartment.

My Name Is Sangoel

By Karen Lynn Williams and Khadra Mohammed, illustrated by Catherine Stock (2009)

As a refugee from Sudan, Sangoel is frustrated that no one in the United States can pronounce his name correctly until he finds a clever way to solve the problem.

My Name Is Yoon

By Helen Recorvits, illustrated by Gabi Swiatkowska (2003)

Disliking the way her name looks written in English, Korean-born Yoon, or "shining wisdom," tries out different names ("Cat," "Bird," and "Cupcake") to feel more comfortable in her new school and new country.

Oliver Finds His Way

By Phyllis Root, illustrated by Christopher Denise (2002)

Oliver the bear becomes lost when he chases a leaf to the edge of the woods, but then he comes up with an idea to find his way back home.

Otto the Book Bear/Otto: El oso de libro

By Katie Cleminson (2012)

Otto lives in a book in a house, but when no one is looking he comes to life. He reads his favorite stories and practices his writing, until he is left behind and must set out in search of a new home.

Tap Tap Boom Boom

By Elizabeth Bluemle, illustrated by G. Brian Karas (2014)

"It's a mad dash for shelter as rain sweeps into an urban neighborhood. Where to go? The subway! It's the perfect place to wait out the wind and weather. Strangers share smiles and umbrellas and take delight in the experience of a city thunderstorm." (From the dust jacket)

These Hands

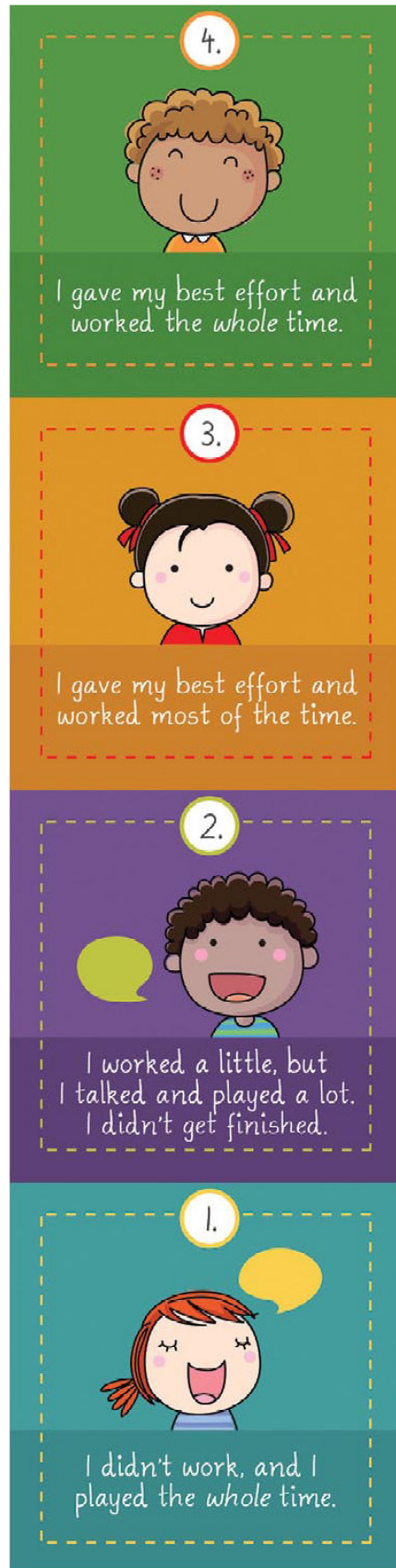
By Margaret H. Mason, illustrated by Floyd Cooper (2010)

An African American man tells his grandson about a time when, despite all the wonderful things his hands could do, they could not touch bread at the Wonder Bread factory. Based on stories of bakery union workers, the book includes historical notes.

(From Lacina, Baumi, & Taylor 2016)

Note: Summaries were obtained from the Library of Congress unless otherwise indicated

Self-Assessment Rubric



to correctly spell *pneumonia*, her effort to express a complex topic in writing was an accomplishment—from Mrs. Durkin and Siobhán herself. To nurture the students’ resilience, Mrs. Durkin encouraged the students to self-assess their efforts, using rubrics such as the one pictured (left). Whether assessment is formal or informal, how children’s work is received affects how they feel about their efforts and their likelihood of embracing challenges in the future. (For more on beneficial praise, see “Praise that Fosters Resilience” on page 22.) Emphasizing effort over product enhances students’ resilience.

Offering Strategies

Teaching children strategies that build resilience gives them tools to tackle learning tasks and subtly reinforces the message that learning takes effort. For example, students who struggle as they learn to read often look to the teacher whenever they come to an unknown word. Teachers foster resilience when, instead of supplying the word right away, they encourage application of a strategy or use of a resource,

such as rereading, applying context clues, considering previous experiences, or using sound/symbol associations (like the letter-sound cards described earlier). Mrs. Durkin quickly responded to Scarlett's upward glance for assistance with an unknown word by pointing back to the book, redirecting Scarlett's attention to cues that she had and skills she could use. If teachers mindfully take this approach, they build their students' independence and resilience. But *mindfully* is key: Teachers should adjust the level of support so that it leads to student success.

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

At home, interactions with parents and other caregivers can help children develop resilience and learn to deal well with challenges. Families can be both coaches and cheerleaders by recognizing their children's strengths and supporting them during difficult experiences. Share the following information and suggestions with families.

- › **Encourage your child to try something even if it seems hard.** Media and peers tend to emphasize talent and performance over effort and persistence, which can foster fear of failure and cause children to avoid risks or procrastinate when they do not feel confident. Although you may be inclined to shield your child from difficult situations, early experiences with failure and disappointment, when accompanied by your support and reassurance, will help your child develop lifelong attributes of persistence and confidence. Learning how to cope with setbacks and discouragement develops the ability to bounce back from adversity. Rather than avoid struggle, resilient people see it as an opportunity or challenge.
- › **Define failure and mistakes as temporary and valuable opportunities to learn.** Your attitudes toward and responses to failure and mistakes—whether your own or your child's—influence how your child responds and the degree of resilience he will develop. Patience is key! When your child makes a mistake, respond with understanding and encouragement rather than blame or criticism. If a household chore, like making the bed, is not done properly, don't just redo it yourself—model and describe the process and support your child as his competence with the task increases. Taking this approach not only helps children see success as an outcome of effort but also encourages them to be less afraid of making mistakes and more willing to persist.
- › **When your child faces a difficult situation, don't solve the problem for her.** Instead, help her analyze what happened and why, and encourage her to identify a solution to try. Your questions can guide the problem-solving process. Listen and be encouraging as your child develops the ability to find solutions.
- › **Offer your child small decisions early and often.** Doing so will help him learn about cause and effect and prepare him for making more consequential decisions later. Even toddlers can have a say in what clothes they wear or whether to have a story before or after bath time. Seeing the effects of their own choices gives them a sense of control.
- › **Be mindful of what you praise your child for.** Although comments like "You are so smart!" may come naturally, praising a child's efforts ("You worked so hard! Look what you've accomplished!") helps them see the connection between persistence and outcome. Valuing effort also helps children focus on personal responsibility and factors that are in their control instead of outside of it—an essential part of resiliency.

Life is challenging and ever changing, but support from parents and caregivers can equip children to face the challenges and changes with confidence!

Note that Mrs. Durkin did not expect her kindergartners to invent strategies for overcoming their reading challenges—she taught them. During small group reading instruction, for instance, Mrs. Durkin taught a set of strategies to develop the children’s persistence in meaning making (Collet 2007). She used an object to introduce and help students remember each strategy: a stop sign to pause and think, a paper clip to make connections, a parrot figure to reread, and a light switch to read on. Later, when children got stuck, they grabbed the corresponding object as a visual reminder of the strategy they had decided to use. In addition, the object gave Mrs. Durkin a way to track which children were having trouble and where to start if she needed to offer extra support. When educators teach and remind students of strategies, students soon use them independently.

Praise that Fosters Resilience

A great way for teachers to inspire resilience is to offer specific praise focused on students’ efforts. Praising children for hard work, rather than for their perceived ability, leads them to value learning opportunities and persist in their efforts (Dweck 2010). Students whose efforts are acknowledged want to “immerse themselves in information that could teach them more” (Dweck 2002, 49). As long as the feedback is genuine (i.e., a student really did try hard), children recognize that improvement is related to effort, so they rise to challenges in ways that enhance their knowledge, skills, and resilience.

Mrs. Durkin praised students in ways that valued their efforts and reinforced essential aspects of their learning, such as adding details and sequencing adverbs to their writing. When Jimarcus read the story he wrote about the zoo to Mrs. Durkin, she responded, “Great detail! You told me the giraffe was yellow and the lizard was green. You also used the word *finally*, which let me know that you were almost finished.”

Similarly, when Zach read Mrs. Durkin his draft, she said, “Good writing, Zach—very nice! I love how you included a zoo train in your story. I know that you are very interested in trains” (Collet 2011). In those few short words, she expressed high expectations, praised Zach’s use of detail, and made a personal connection by recalling Zach’s passion for trains. This type of feedback encourages students to learn new things, persist after difficulty, use better strategies for correcting mistakes, and improve performance (Cimpian et al. 2007; Zentall & Morris 2010).

Emphasizing the Learning Process

Emphasizing process enables teachers—and children—to tie together all of the components of resilient classrooms discussed previously. A strong process encompasses appropriate resources, goal setting, effort, and student-centered strategies.

In Mrs. Durkin’s classroom, writing workshop time provided opportunities for drafting and revision that cultivated a realistic understanding of the writing process and supported resilience. Like professional writers, students revisited their favorite pieces, improving their writing as they acquired new strategies. They delighted in learning about the caret symbol (^), which they would use to insert new ideas without having to rewrite their whole text. A look through children’s writing folders showed that they were taking advantage of it often to add new thoughts to their writing. Correction tape was another favorite tool in Mrs. Durkin’s classroom. In contrast to recopying their work to make a correction, which was laborious, using correction tape made the improvement process fun. Tools like these dramatically reduce the consequences of making a mistake, so they help students focus on accomplishing their goals through sustained effort. By offering experiences that emphasize the learning process and encourage risk taking over perfection, teachers create a classroom climate that builds resilience.

Classroom Management Practices that Enhance Resilience

Keeping resilience in mind when creating resources and planning for instruction lays the groundwork for nurturing buoyant learning attitudes. Classroom management is equally important, as it offers opportunities throughout the day to teach appropriate behavior, foster independence, and reinforce a resilient approach to learning.

Managing Behavior

Children benefit from experiencing consistent expectations, rules, and consequences. Seeing the connection between actions and results gives children a sense of predictability and control over their environment—necessary ingredients for resilience. When teachers select logical consequences for

Creating a Resilient Classroom

Instead of doing this . . .	Do this . . .	And get students who . . .
Emphasizing high-stakes assessments	Have students set and work toward short-term goals	See growth as incremental and attainable
Talking about failures or successes as being connected to talent or traits (e.g., “You’re so smart!”)	Define failure as an opportunity to learn and success as a result of hard work	Are persistent
Requiring correct spelling from emergent writers	Encourage use of invented spelling	Are willing to take risks
Supplying an unknown word when students are reading or writing	Use cues and classroom resources	Recognize their problem-solving skills
Explaining the meaning of texts	Teach comprehension strategies	Value their own thinking and use strategies to figure things out on their own
Providing extensive feedback on final products	Provide feedback throughout the writing process	Value revision and continual improvement
Giving mostly correction	Give encouragement that celebrates steps in the right direction	Feel encouraged, worthwhile, and empowered to persist in their efforts
Praising only outcomes	Acknowledge and support effort, regardless of outcome	Are willing to take on challenges
Applying consequences unrelated to the misbehavior	Set logical, reasonable consequences that are related to the behavior	Learn that choices have consequences and, therefore, better evaluate their future decisions
Performing classroom procedures yourself	Involve students in managing classroom procedures	Feel empowered

inappropriate behavior, children better understand the cause-and-effect relationships that their actions initiate. For example, a young student who colors on his chair would benefit from a warm but firm explanation of where to color and the logical consequence of having to clean his chair. In Mrs. Durkin's room, when children became too noisy while talking to their partners, Mrs. Durkin gave the students a cue by lowering the volume of her own voice when she introduced the next topic for discussion. This emphasized the consequences of students' conduct rather than escalating the concern, and students responded by using the quiet "12-inch voices" that Mrs. Durkin had taught them, which should only be able to be heard a foot away. Through many similar interactions, children gradually recognize the connection between their actions and the consequences that follow, which develops their self-efficacy and internal locus of control—attributes that encourage resilience (Schwarzer & Warner 2013).

Reflection Questions

1. Think about an experience where you learned from making mistakes or failing. What helped you emerge from the situation in a resilient way? How could you incorporate these factors into your classroom environment, taking into account the children's ages and developmental characteristics?
2. Learning requires risk taking and mistakes. What can you do to encourage and celebrate trial and error in your classroom while still protecting children's physical and psychological safety?
3. What resources in your classroom support children's independent problem solving? What additional resources could you incorporate? Review the discussion of various learning formats to enhance learning on pages 187–188 in *Developmentally Appropriate Practice* (NAEYC 2022) for some ideas.
4. When children set and achieve goals, their resilience increases. Are the children you teach setting individual short-term goals? How do you see and encourage appropriate goal setting in children? How do you help children notice and keep track of their progress? How do you adapt your approach to their ages and developmental characteristics?
5. As you work with children, be aware of how you use praise. Are you praising ability or effort? How could you change your wording to focus on effort and encourage persistence? Try out some new wording with a colleague or other partner. For examples of strategies to encourage effort and independence, see page 201 of *Developmentally Appropriate Practice* (NAEYC 2022).

Sharing Responsibilities

Sharing responsibilities with children is another way to promote resilience. Teachers can create meaningful ways to empower children. In Mrs. Durkin's room, there were multiple roles for students to fill each week: the "stick puller" pulled Popsicle sticks with children's names from a basket to determine who would respond to questions; the "table managers" ensured that all students in their group had the necessary items for an activity; and the "light monitor" decided whether lights needed to be on or off for best viewing, depending on the activity. For kindergartners, these are meaningful roles that significantly impact the learning environment. When children see that they are important members of the classroom community, their resilience increases (Henderson 2012).

Conclusion

Through their instruction, resources, responses to students, and management procedures, teachers can present problems as opportunities awaiting creative solutions. When children learn to handle, rather than avoid, less-than-ideal situations in the classroom, they build resilience that can transfer beyond the classroom walls. Difficult experiences provide children with opportunities to show

determination, using available resources to rise above disappointment. When problems arise, resilient children don't blame others or themselves; their energy is focused on solutions, asking, "What can I do differently?"

As teachers build students' resilience, students come to recognize mistakes and failures as chances to learn; they realize that discovery requires trying the unfamiliar. (For specific classroom practices and general approaches that can be modified to nurture resilience, see "Creating a Resilient Classroom" on page 23.) Developing resilience is an important step toward becoming a lifelong learner who seeks challenges and uses mistakes as stepping stones to personal and academic success.

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