

Fostering Resilience

Teaching Social-Emotional Skills

Dan Gartrell and Karen Burger Cairone

RESILIENCE IS THE ABILITY TO USE SOCIAL-emotional skills to overcome, or bounce back from, the effects of stress in one's life (Wright 2013). Risk and stress are present in everyone's life. Throughout life, children and adults alike benefit greatly from the ability to be resilient (Masten 2001).

This column is a case study of Jake, age 3½, who showed a pattern of serious classroom conflicts. The preschool teacher, Ms. Delfrey, requested assistance, and Ms. Johnson, a behavioral consultant, worked with Jake and Ms. Delfrey at the Belle Aire Early Childhood Center over a period of months. Ms. Johnson guided the teaching staff and Jake's family in using a resilience-based program of assessment and behavioral strategies to help Jake build the emotional and social skills inherent in resilience. A typical scenario at the beginning of the program follows:

Jake grabs a dinosaur from Carlos. They wrestle for it back and forth. Jake finally pulls the T. rex away and swats Carlos on the arm with it. Carlos cries. Jake quickly looks for somewhere to hide where he can enjoy the T. rex for a few seconds before Ms. Delfrey intervenes.

Assessing Jake's behavior

After several days of observations and interviews, Ms. Johnson concluded that Jake was dealing with a toxic level of stress (Gunnar, Herrera, & Hostinar 2009; Shonkoff & Garner 2012). The stress caused him to see common classroom situations, such as having to share a toy, as threatening. His reaction tendency—in his view to protect and affirm himself—was to act out against other children and adults (Gartrell 2011). In an interview early in the program Ms. Delfrey commented, “Those of us who have taught Jake over the past two years are at our wits' end, trying every strategy we've learned or read about, to no avail.”

Whenever a behavioral consultant works with a new child, she first identifies strengths. Jake was independent and sensitive, and possessed budding leadership skills such as a sense of humor, the ability to negotiate, and persistence. He was also helpful. However, with a child like Jake, some adults might have difficulty recognizing and building on his strengths because his

frequent aggressive behaviors can overshadow them. Some teachers tend to want ideas that will work quickly.

Empowering resilience

For several months Ms. Johnson collaborated with the center staff and Jake's mom, Sylvia, to implement a strengths-based approach to foster Jake's resilience. This team worked to develop *protective factors* for Jake. Protective factors are (1) external factors in the environment at home and at school and (2) internal psychological factors that together moderate the effects of stress, contributing to positive outcomes for the child (Cairone & Mackrain 2012).

Regarding the *environmental protective factors*, Sylvia's participation was critical. Ms. Johnson and Ms. Delfrey teamed with Sylvia to create ways she could best help Jake outside of school. Regular phone calls between Ms. Delfrey and Sylvia were key. Their growing relationship helped them work together to cultivate protective factors for Jake.

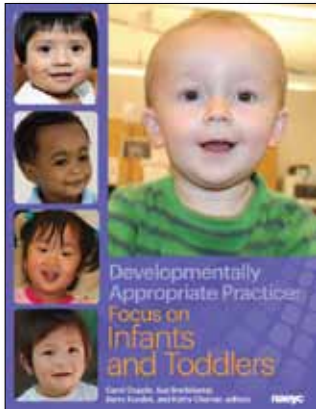
Ms. Johnson asked the adults to use a consistent approach to respond to Jake's behaviors in the classroom and at home. One strategy that worked well was talking with Jake about his tantrums after he had regained composure. Ms. Johnson helped Sylvia understand that after Jake calmed down he was more able to talk about his feelings and consider trying a different behavior the next time he was upset. Sylvia was open to using this strategy with Jake, a real strength in the eyes of the behavioral consultant. Through the educator–parent partnership, Sylvia felt more positively involved in Jake's life at home and at school. As a result Sylvia's parenting style became more consistent for Jake, lowering his stress levels and helping him respond to others. Helping Sylvia see herself as a worthy parent was central to giving Jake the environmental protective factors he needed.

To promote Jake's *internal protective factors*, the team focused on social-emotional skills in three areas: attachment/relationships, initiative, and self-regulation (LeBuffe & Naglieri 2012).

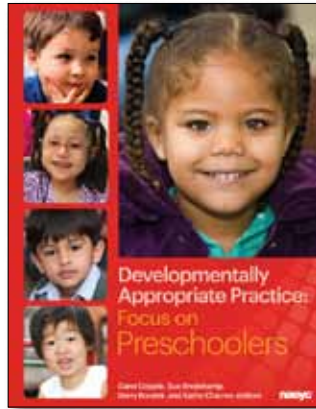
Attachment and relationships

To help Jake connect with children, Ms. Johnson suggested peer partnering. This involves intentionally

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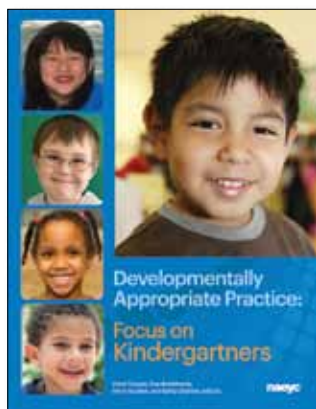
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pairing children to do a task, routine, activity, or project together—usually so one child can learn skills from the other and perhaps build a friendship (Cairone & Mackrain 2012).

Ms. Delfrey observed Jake gaining key skills (such as patience, turn taking, assertiveness without being hurtful, and empathy) when he was partnered with children he did not seem to consider threatening. When the teachers encouraged and scaffolded Jake's use of these new skills in his interactions, Jake formed new friendships.

Initiative

Jake loved to help. When he could not find ways to help, he created problems he could “solve,” such as pushing children down on the playground so he could help them back up. He needed opportunities to contribute in constructive ways in order to develop a sense of belonging and responsibility (Cairone & Mackrain 2012). The teachers implemented a personalized helper chart for Jake. For example, one of his jobs was wiping tables after snack and mealtime. He also held open the door when the class came into or out of the building. At home, Sylvia also used a helper chart to guide Jake to do such tasks as setting the table and putting his toys away.

When adults created positive opportunities for Jake to help and be an active, contributing member of the classroom and his family, his ability to show initiative flourished. His budding leadership qualities, such as assertion and perseverance, became strengths. As a result, more children wanted to play with him.

Self-regulation

To help Jake handle strong emotions in nonhurting ways, Ms. Johnson guided the team in using the following behavioral strategies (Sperry 2011). As a first step, they helped Jake to calm himself, often by having him leave the situation and spending quiet moments with him.

- **Identify feelings:** Adults gently talked with Jake about his feelings. They told him what they saw and heard when he expressed his emotions. They helped him identify the root feelings that caused the behavior: “It seems like you were very upset because you thought you had the T. rex first.”
- **Set limits:** They reminded Jake about the positive limits and expectations they had for his behavior: “Friendly touches only” (rather than “No hitting!”).
- **Ask questions:** Adults encouraged Jake to think of solutions to his challenges by asking open-ended questions. This promoted problem solving and nurtured healthy coping skills: “How can you help Carlos feel better?”
- **Offer prompts:** They provided cues, clues, and suggestions for Jake when he had difficulty coming up with his own solutions: “Next time you are upset, come get me or call Mrs. Delfrey.”

Seeing positive results

After observing change in Jake over time, the teachers and Sylvia experienced newfound confidence in their own abilities; Ms. Delfrey offered a new profile of Jake: “Often I find myself smiling at his progress. I realize he has assertiveness, persistence, and a desire to help. I hope these are skills he holds on to, learning to couple them with more positive behaviors.” Sylvia too found affirmation in Jake's progress and participated in parent–staff follow-up meetings to ensure that things stayed on track for her son.

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Karen Burger Cairone, MEd, is an author and national trainer with the Devereux Center for Resilient Children. Her publications include *Promoting Resilience in Preschoolers: A Strategy Guide for Early Childhood Professionals*.

The names of the child, mother, teacher, consultant, and center have been changed. We nevertheless thank the actual center staff who participated in and contributed to this case study. Please send possible guidance anecdotes and other comments to dgartrell@bemidjistate.edu.

Guidance Matters is available at www.naeyc.org/yc/columns.