



UNH Center on
Adolescence

A Primer on Promoting Resiliency in Adolescents

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Resiliency is the ability to bounce back or cope in the face of adversity. It can be envisioned to be like a rubber band – where adversity pulls at it and stretches it, but it has the ability to come back and resume its original shape. For a long time, those working with adolescents only concentrated on the forces pulling at the rubber band – the things that “stress them out” or cause teens to be “at risk.” However, starting about 15 years ago, a shift in emphasis occurred...one that continued to look at risk, but also started to look at hardiness, resiliency, and the protective factors that can be used to counterbalance the challenges adolescence face in our society.

Adolescence is an exciting, but challenging, developmental stage. It is a time of many changes: physical growth and puberty; changes in self-identity and self-esteem; the search for increased independence; the importance of peer groups; and increased responsibilities and societal expectations. All of these can lead teens to feel those stretches and pulls on their past coping strategies and the need to develop new skills to help their inner “rubber band” retain its shape. If you add to these developmental challenges, a host of risk factors including (but not limited to) academic difficulties, lack of pro-social norms or role models, family dysfunction, gender or ethnic discrimination, and/or poverty, you would not be surprised to find an adolescent with a real challenge trying to balance the risks vs. the protective factors in his or her life.

So what are some protective factors that we can help adolescents develop to counteract the stresses and adversity they face? Here are some suggestions:

1. ***Develop a realistic “locus of control” or appraisal of one’s environment.*** For a while, those in the helping professions thought it was better to encourage an “internal locus of control” – the idea that it was within one’s power to control his/her life and to alter his/her environment. However, not everything is realistically in the control of a 14 year old and this is especially true for teens in high-risk environments. Therefore, you can help teens to cope by teaching them to make a realistic appraisal of their circumstances and to work on the things that it is in their power to change. Help them use the serenity prayer from 12 step programs – Accept the things they cannot change (at least for now), change the things they can, and have the wisdom to know the differences. Or maybe help them make good decisions using the words from the Kenny Rogers song – “Know when to hold ‘em; Know when to fold ‘em, Know when to walk away; Know when to run.”
2. ***Nuture a skill or talent.*** Most teens can do something praiseworthy; whether it is through an artistic or literary talent, a sport’s skill, a degree of technological savvy, being a volunteer, etc. Encouraging the development of a skill or talent not only increases a teen’s self-esteem, but also helps them to receive “positive attention” from their peers and the adults in their world.

3. ***Encourage the development of “fair fighting” and good conflict resolution strategies.*** Adolescence and conflicts seem to go hand- in-hand, so helping teens develop mediation strategies can be very helpful in reducing stress and promoting resiliency. Teens can learn to initiate good problem solving strategies when a conflict is brewing: State their views calmly and clearly using “I” statements; Brainstorm possible solutions; Agree on an alternative; and Spell out how the outcome will be monitored.
4. ***Develop the ability to adaptively distance themselves from negative influences.*** We all know it’s not as easy as “just say know.” Helping adolescents to recognize the negative influences that they may encounter and develop a specific strategy to cope can promote protectiveness in the face of risks.
5. ***Promote the development of a mid/long term purpose or goal.*** Adolescents often are focused on the here and now. They have difficult developing a realistic goal for a year from now or five years from now. Yet, youth who have a life purpose, a goal, and a belief in their future seem to be better able to stay focused and avoid negative distractions. For example, I worked with a youth in foster care whose goal was to be the first one in his family to graduate high school and go on to some form of post-secondary education. This youth was better able to cope with the traumas in his life through coaching on how to stay focused on the steps needed to achieve his goal... and he did.
6. ***Be (or help identify) a mentor, guide, role model, coach, or tutor for a teen.*** Adolescents benefit from having a variety of caring and concerned adults in their life when stress is pulling at their “inner rubber band.” Although they may seem to only listen to their peers or the popular media, the knowledge that they have an adult in their corner (waiting in the wings) can make a big difference for a teen.

For further information about resiliency enhancement or for a bibliography on the subject of resiliency and protective factors, please feel free to contact Dr. Zunz at (603) 862-1785 or sjz@cisunix.unh.edu