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Getting and Keeping Your Groove: Building Resilience in Adults

by Rachel Robertson and Helen Zarba

Photograph by Bonnie Neugebauer

Life is hard. There, we said it. There are ups and downs, good and bad in everyone's lives. Some days are good, some days not so much. We work in a field where we have all chosen to give a lot of ourselves. We are inspired and fulfilled by our work (if we aren't, we should consider finding different careers), but that doesn't mean it doesn't take its toll. Amidst stories and block play, learning to read and tie shoes, there are children who need us: to teach them how to read and tie shoes, to play with and laugh with, to hug and console, to dry tears and ease worries. And sometimes there are children who need us even more: whose home lives are unhappy, whose behavior or development concern us, whose parents are unable to give them what they need. Let's face it, parents and families often need us, too. So while we early childhood professionals are a naturally hardy group of people, we regularly draw on our resilience and strength. If we don't replenish these, we'll burn out. To avoid this, we must continually nurture our resilience.

Resilience

What is resilience anyway? Resilience is a set of characteristics that allows a person to overcome adversity and recover or bounce back. We are all born with some natural resilience, but childhood experiences and parent modeling, adult life experiences, and individual temperament all impact our ability to build and sustain our resilience.

Adults possess varying levels of resilience. Just think about the people you know. Do you know someone who smiles through every crisis and always looks on the proverbial 'bright side'? Conversely, do you know someone who feels like life is out to get him? These are both measures of a person's individual perspective on life and resilience.



Resilience is built in ways that may surprise you. For instance, if a child has the opportunity to solve her own problems, she will develop confidence in her own abilities, perseverance, and grit. While many parents often rush to solve their children's problems, it's often the opposite response that is best for children (as long as the children are safe and it is within their developmental capacity). So, if you're a person who has had some challenges in life and made it through successfully, you're more likely to be



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As the Vice President of Organizational Development and Learning Services, Helen oversees the corporate Learning and Development Function at Bright Horizons. In her role, Helen has had the opportunity to interact with, learn from, and support thousands of employees in all phases of their careers. Through her work and research she has found that resilient leadership practices are key to a leader's success and she integrates these concepts into the leadership development programs she supports.

resilient than your friends who have had it 'easy' their whole lives.

In *The Price of Privilege*, Madeline Engel (2006) shares stories of teens who never had the chance to find their way in life, to test their own abilities, or to discover their strengths. This can pose both significant and minor challenges throughout life. Consider this example:



A high school student with low resilience gets a bad grade on a test and thinks, "I am stupid. I can't do this. I am a failure." A student with high resilience in the same scenario thinks, "Wow, I didn't expect that. I'll have to work harder next time because I know I can do better."

Put that way, it would seem that we always should do what we can to nurture the second (more resilient) attitude in children and in ourselves.

As we said at the beginning, life is hard. But those who are happy and fulfilled despite life's challenges are those with high levels of resilience. The good news is that a few life-style changes can increase your resilience — and your life satisfaction.

Why Should Employers Care?

Have you ever had a work day when your spouse, kids, house, bills, health, or other personal issues didn't enter your mind? Neither have we. We bring all of our issues with us wherever we go. And the challenges we face impact our work productivity. If an employer wants the best from us, it is in their best interest to support our resilience. (So if you're an employer keep reading. If you're an employee

figure out a way to leave this article casually on your employer's desk.)

What You Can Do

First, employers/supervisors must model good resilience-building behaviors. Nothing you suggest will have credibility if you don't do it yourself. In modeling resilience-building behaviors, you give your employees permission to take care of themselves. This is not extra work for you, but an integral part of your role in keeping productive and effective employees.

Research on resilience points to the following categories as key: positive relationships, achievement, control, meaning, and engagement. These categories work together, like links in a chain, to form a strong internal capacity for resilience. We'll explore these categories here and provide examples for implementation. Note: Our examples are all workplace-related, but you can certainly transfer these ideas to your personal life if you choose.

Positive relationships: This is about developing mutually-dependent, trusting relationships:

- All staff should feel they need and can rely on each other.
- All personalities should be welcomed and included.
- Recognizing coworkers and supervisors as people who will listen to your troubles and challenges is an essential part of resilience.

Strategies — Self:

- Be a good friend and coworker. Give more to a relationship than you get. Ironically, this often results in your getting more than you give. For example, do something kind for a peer or co-worker weekly. Maybe it's sending a sincere thank-you card or email. Perhaps it's doing a task for them like washing dishes. Do these things to support your relationship rather than expecting anything in return.
- See the humor in life: Laugh, giggle, chuckle, snort if you have to. Smiling inevitably increases your serotonin (the happy hormone in your brain) and the serotonin in those you smile at. Powerful.

- Celebrate the accomplishments of others. This perspective improves the feelings you have about your own circumstances.

Strategies — Team:

- Eliminate gossip. Set high expectations and model integrity. Nothing kills trust and positivity more than gossip.

- Encourage staff to raise issues of concern (in a respectful way) without repercussions, whether in one-on-one meetings or group reflection sessions. Be mindful of how you respond to these concerns so you don't discourage them even if you don't agree. Say things like, "I hear what you're saying" or "It's clear that you are frustrated," rather than, "That's just how it is" or "You're making a big deal out of nothing."
- Invite staff to share what types of deposits or withdrawals impact their emotional bank accounts. (Refer to Stephen Covey's *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, 2004, for details). Post the detailed bank accounts and encourage everyone to put some deposits in each other's accounts whenever they can. Inevitably, there will be times when we need to make a withdrawal and we'll need a bit of established credit.

Achievement: Achievement is not synonymous with success and isn't defined exclusively by benchmarks like annual performance reviews. This category focuses on personal perceptions of achievement and ensuring that each person has the opportunity to establish and achieve goals in areas that matter to her.

Strategies — Self:

- Define your personal goals and identify ways to work toward them. Judge yourself based on your progress.
- Challenge yourself. Push yourself, step out of that box, take risks: Discover something new about yourself by exploring a new hobby; make plans for the next step in your career; create fitness goals for yourself. Don't let predetermined theories of success discourage you. Find a buddy to work with in achieving your goals.

Strategies — Team:

- Come up with group goals and work together to achieve them. Enjoy the process of identifying and working together toward an agreed-upon goal as much as achieving it. Reflect on what you're gaining in the process: a deeper understanding of each other, shared experiences, new skills, and so on. Celebrate each step along the way. Do this by dedicating time at a staff meeting or staff event to discussing goals. The goals we set for ourselves are often more challenging and more rewarding than we expect.
- Give some attention to your strengths. Spend time identifying each team member's strengths and create ways to encourage their contributions to the team/workplace in new ways. (Use the book *Strengths Finder*

2.0 by Tom Rath, 2007 or try something like the self-assessments on the Authentic Happiness website: www.authentic happiness.sas.upenn.edu/Default.aspx.)

Meaning: The meaning of life is different for each of us. The following anonymous quote emphasizes this point: The purpose of life is to have a purpose in life. Whatever your unique perspective on this issue, it's important to identify it and feel free to pursue it. If you can work somewhere where you feel you make an important contribution that is connected, your definition of 'the meaning of life' is even better.

Strategies — Self:

- Have you defined what is personally meaningful to you? If not, spend some time identifying what matters to you most. Make a top five list and concentrate your efforts in those areas: maybe it's family, volunteering in a shelter, or working for environmental protection. Whatever gives your life meaning deserves top priority on your to-do list.
- Be grateful each day and keep track of your gratitude. Keeping a gratitude journal is a great way to do this. Writing down three things you are grateful for each day is a wonderful way to train yourself to look for the positive and minimize your focus on the negative. There's even an app for that.

Strategies — Team:

- Encourage random (or planned) acts of kindness among staff members to create a happy workplace: Leave thank-you notes in the teacher supply closet, brush snow off windshields at the end of the day.
- Choose a charity or cause to support together. Fundraising, like a children's art fair, or donations, like mitten or penny collections, can be directed at this cause. With a collective effort it's likely the impact of your support will be visible and very rewarding.

Control: Everyone needs to feel in control of his life in some way. We all have to conform and 'go along to get along' sometimes, but it is essential that people feel in control of their destiny and life path as well in some of their small, daily choices.

Strategies — Self:

- The perspective we take shapes our reality. Those 'glass half full' people are onto something. Seeing the positive

does not mean you aren't living in the real world; it means you are intentionally deciding how things influence you. We can't always control circumstances, but we can always control how we perceive and respond to them. Test your reactions to adversity and work on finding the silver lining. Do this even if you have to write it down or grasp at small things (e.g., the good part about getting in a minor bumper accident is my daughter had an opportunity to meet firefighters and climb in the fire truck). Even if this is a strength of yours, focusing on it will continue to build your resilience.

- When you feel out of control or a decision has been made for you, create an 'In' and 'Out' list. Write the problem at the top of the page and list what is **in** your control and **out** of your control. This will help you avoid wasted time thinking about things you can't control. Writing them down and acknowledging them helps us let them go while we focus on the things we can control.
- Prioritize your health. Feeling in control of your health and developing a positive body image contributes to overall feelings of well-being and control among other benefits.

Strategies — Team:

- Delegate. Often, we're afraid to do this because it feels like passing off work. In reality, delegation is a great way to develop new skills in your staff or capitalize on existing strengths. In the end, it leads to team achievement, rather than solo stardom.
- Have a suggestion box or other mechanism for encouraging constructive feedback from your staff and make your efforts to address their concerns and suggestions visible. This communicates that their ideas are valued and their suggestions are taken seriously. Not all suggestions need to be followed, but when you implement a team suggestion once in awhile you communicate that everyone can contribute and have some control or influence.

Engagement: You know the part in dancing the Hokey Pokey when you put your whole self in? That's what engagement is all about. We all need activities we can become completely engrossed in: times when we stop watching the clock and give ourselves fully to the task at hand. For many in early childhood, these are the moments we — and the children — enjoy most.

Strategies — Self:

- Stop multi-tasking. Brain research tells us we do this miserably. Our brains just can't focus on more than one

complex thing at a time. Worse, each time we switch tasks, we have to mentally re-enter the activity. So each time you check your phone for a message while in a meeting, you mentally leave the meeting and must mentally re-enter: a waste of time and energy.

- Do what you love. This seems so simple, but we don't all do it. So, if you don't love working with young children, don't do it. It's not good for anyone. If you don't love managing a program, don't do it. We know it's simple to say, but no one benefits if there's a mismatch between you and your job. If nothing else, identify the things you love about your work and start doing more of them — or start planning a job change or career move.

Strategies — Team:

- Minimize interruptions. If you are popping into a classroom with reminders every 20 minutes, you are constantly disrupting the flow of the work. If you randomly chat with your co-administrators while they're working, you interrupt their ability to function at the highest level.
- Allow others to do their work in their way (as long as it is not harmful). Have you ever heard that you should appreciate the help your child gives you by making her bed or your spouse offers by loading the dishwasher — even if they don't do it the way you would? The same goes for employees. As long as they are getting the job done, it is important to let them do it their way even if it's not your way. You sometimes cause more issues 'fixing' their work than does them or you any good.

Employers Doing this Right

Bright Horizons is a company that has received the honor of being on *Fortune's* list of Best 100 Places to Work 14 years in a row. They must be doing something right. One of these things is a conscious effort to focus on employee well-being:

- Give annual assessments of employees' well-being.
- Provide support and resources to help employees effectively manage their whole lives and whole selves. This includes, among other things, training for employees on resilience.
- Develop a well-being help center that offers support to employees on topics from wedding planning to emotional health.

Cynthia Cleary-Cesena, Executive Director of La Costa Valley Preschool & Kindergarten, makes employee wellness and resilience a priority, too. It's not always financially or logisti-

cally possible to offer big perks or programs to her team, but she finds regular opportunities to support team resilience. Building personal relationships is one of her top priorities. Cynthia focuses on building camaraderie and embracing the qualities of each individual team member through fun team outings to thank you notes and recognition tokens to just enjoying each other and the work each day. Cynthia is passionate about the meaning of her work and shares and promotes that passion amongst her team as well. Employee health is also a focus: time for longer lunches is offered so employees can go on walks on local nature paths.

It is often said that it's the little things in life that matter. This is true of resilience as well. Making small, sustainable changes in your own attitude and behavior and how you work with your teams will make significant differences.

It is not important to implement all of the suggestions listed here at once. In fact, I would suggest the opposite. Choose the ideas that make the most sense to you: the ideas that would be meaningful to you and your team. Then put these into place with your whole heart. This will contribute to consistency and make these efforts feel less like a trend or 'flavor of the month' and more like a new mindset or an important change to the way things are done in your program. These efforts can lead to higher job satisfaction; increased overall happiness; better relationships with children, families and colleagues; important role modeling for children; and, perhaps most importantly, an improved ability to withstand and even thrive in the face of challenges.

References

Engel, M. (2006). *The price of privilege: How parental pressure and materials advantage are creating a generation of disconnected and unhappy kids*. New York: Harper.

Hallowell, E. (2002). *The childhood roots of adult happiness*. New York: Ballantine Books.

Seligman, M. (2011). *Flourish*. New York: Free Press.

Resources

Authentic Happiness:

www.authentichappiness.sas.upenn.edu/Default.aspx

Devereux Center for Resilient Children:

Resources and information for teachers on building their own resilience

www.centerforresilientchildren.org/adults/

1000 Awesome Things: An award-winning blog:

<http://1000awesomethings.com/>

A few suggested TED talks:

■ Shawn Achor

<http://goodthinkinc.com/media/>

■ Neil Pasricha

www.ted.com/talks/neil_pasricha_the_3_a_s_of_awesome.html

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