



“I keep me safe.”

Risk and resilience in children with messy lives



Educators can recognize that behaviors that are considered problems at school may have developed because they keep students safe in the terrifying parts of their lives.

By Travis Wright

I first met James while working as a mental health counselor at Child Works, a Head Start center in one of the nation’s largest urban housing developments. Five years old, James had been referred to counseling for refusing to follow classroom instructions and for variously hitting Mr. Elias, his teacher, and running away from him. Mr. Elias, a 20-year veteran of the public schools, described James “as the most disrespectful little kid [he] had ever seen!”

During my initial classroom observation, James seemed fully engaged when playing with classmates, and they seemed to respond positively to him. However, it was striking that he never allowed his back to be turned to the teachers. A subtle dance, he was always turning to make sure that he could keep an eye on Mr. Elias. He was only slightly more tolerant of Ms. Dawson, the assistant teacher.

Given his seeming trepidation about adults, I decided to get to know James inside his classroom before asking him to spend time alone with me in the play therapy suite. I also hoped that watching his classmates interact with me could help further his trust. For almost two months, I spent a few hours each week playing with James and the other children in his classroom. I went out of my way to acknowledge him any other time we happened to cross paths at school. Though he was extremely reluctant at first, eventually James became less guarded as the other children began to feel more comfortable around me.

I thought that it was time to begin our clinical work together outside of the classroom. To allow James to prepare himself for the transition, I began telling him at the end of each session how long it would be before we would begin visiting in the playroom. I assumed that his lack of acknowledgement meant acceptance of this plan.

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On the fateful morning, I walked to the door of James' classroom, presented him with the "magic key" to the playroom, and asked if he wanted to lead us to the therapy suite. He simply took the key, threw it across the room, and said, "I ain't going nowhere with you."

Attempting a therapeutic response, I replied, "It can be scary to visit a new place. I am your friend, and I will do everything possible to make sure you are safe."

James took a swing at my knees and said, "Leave me the f*** alone."

Shocked at how quickly the situation was escalating, I asked James. "Can you tell me why you would like to stay here?"

He said, "I don't know you. Mommy says I can't talk to no strange people. They want to kill little kids."

"Some people do hurt children. I want to help you feel safe," I replied.

Putting his hands on his hips, James looked at me and said, "I keep me safe."

Needless to say, we did not go to the playroom that day. But, over time, I did manage to build a relationship with James and his mother — and came to appreciate more deeply the challenges they experienced at home. Working long hours to make ends meet, James' mother, Fonda, worried constantly about leaving James in the care of his elderly grandmother. Well-intentioned but physically unable to keep up with an active five-year-old, the grandmother often allowed him to play unsupervised in their neighborhood. With more than 15 registered sexual offenders living within a few blocks of the home, Fonda feared the worst for her son. So she taught James to watch his back and never let his guard down, especially for adults who went out of their way to be nice.

With this threatening reality, James' behavior was an understandable response to living in fear. While placing James at risk of negative relationships with his teachers and possibly other challenges in the academic environment, keeping up his guard was serving his more basic survival needs. Given this, should we say that James is not resilient? Might it be more appropriate to say that what he has to do to be resilient at home is affecting his resilience at school?

Changing our perspective

Our notions of risk and resilience often contribute to critical misunderstandings of young people. Our own limited perspectives frequently get in the way of engaging the strengths of students, especially those with messy lives. Given the role of adult expectations in shaping positive life outcomes for students, reframing educators' perspectives on "at-risk" and resilience for students navigating adversity may be

critical to improving their — and our — long-term prospects.

Though we do our best to protect children from life's underbelly, bad things happen. Hurricanes, school shootings, divorce, exploding crime rates, economic downturns, child abuse, and acts of terror have become reality for many. Students are not immune from the chaos that often results. If a child worries that he is not safe or thinks the world is out to get him, growing up becomes a gauntlet. Rather than racing to the top, children in these circumstances feel they simply must fight for their lives. Unfortunately, if all one ever has known in her short life is stress and struggle, the seeds of hope may never have been planted. Growing without hope is a recipe for disaster, for the child and the world.

Trauma overwhelms one's capacity to cope. Traumatic events force children to confront how vulnerable they actually are and may lead them to view the world as a dangerous place. As a result, those growing up in the midst of adversity often see the potential for tragedy where most see safety. In such an upside-down environment, mistrust is more protective than trust, and fear is more powerful than hope.

When navigating life's challenges, one's typical response is to protect one's self. This tends to be accomplished through one of three classic responses: fighting, freezing, or fleeing. Often, students manifest these responses literally, through acts of physical aggression, refusing to move, or bolting. More frequently, however, student behavior that is motivated by one of these three traumatic responses is less obvious. For example, freezing often means students appear zoned out or falling asleep in class. Rather than engage in physical violence, a student might fight by refusing assistance, dismissing feedback, or by breaking classroom rules. And, though physically present, students may be distracted by traumatic flashbacks or consumed by fear. Consequently, students who flee emotionally may seem off task or all over the place in their thinking.

When growing up in the context of fear, children assume the worst, which makes them less likely to give new people or situations the benefit of the doubt. Any new or unexpected stimuli will send them running for cover or may trigger a traumatic flashback. A door slamming, a physical education teacher screaming instructions in the gymnasium, an unexpected announcement over the intercom, the shame of poor performance on an assignment, or a chaotic transition from the cafeteria, for example, may be enough to trigger terror in the child already living in fear. While, for most, these stimuli retreat into the background of life, each could represent the beginning of the next awful episode for those who expect to be victimized.



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When students are forced to choose between success at school and things that keep them safe at home, they will always choose safety.

Given this, many children come to school every-day in survival mode — watching their backs, ready to run out the door at the first sign of danger, or sitting quietly in the corner trying to remain invisible. Unfortunately, though protective, there is no peace of mind for a child living in a state of such hyper-vigilance. Constantly surveying the scene for danger, there is little energy for learning, growing, or making friends if you are fighting for your life.

Surviving vs. thriving

Unfortunately, the traumatic responses that young people use to navigate difficult life circumstances are frequently misunderstood. Fighting is dismissed as crying out for attention. Freezing or the resultant silence is interpreted as defiance. Fleeing may be labeled at-risk. The behaviors that may be keeping students safe in the terrifying parts of their lives are simply behavior problems at school. Increasingly, students most in need of a supportive refuge are expelled from classrooms for being too needy, difficult, or causing too much trouble.

Confirming their fears that the world is out to get them, school becomes just one more dangerous place when educators punish students for what they're doing to survive. Thus, educators must develop conceptions of resilience that are dynamic and allow multiple perspectives of the student to emerge. More than a simple balance sheet of risk or protective factors, resilience is an ongoing developmental process of responding to the changing demands of one's environment. Indeed, recognizing that people change environments and that environments change people is where we find the greatest seeds of hope.

Resilience through risk

Across my experiences as an educator, spanning from pre-K through university levels, students who most need positive support almost always receive the worst treatment from peers and adults. In the high-need, low-resource environment of the classroom, the most difficult and troublesome students are labeled behavior problems, or they get lost in the shuffle. A child whose life is overflowing with challenges doesn't know when to stop struggling or how to embrace joy. Unfortunately, for many children who never come to expect much from the world, this attitude is often an important determinant of their future life outcomes.

However, in reframing, educators also can understand the willingness to struggle as a resilient act of self-preservation. Their survival skills may not serve them well in the classroom, but they're efficient responses to challenges facing students outside the classroom. Initially, my emotional response was only to feel sorry for children living in the midst of

Willingness to struggle may also be understood as a resilient act of self-preservation.

challenging circumstances; now, I also have come to respect their strength.

No child deserves to experience life's challenges, but many children do persevere. Rather than seeing them as failing to thrive, changing my perspective on their ability to overcome adversity enabled me to recognize children living in the midst of difficulties as individuals fighting to live. Through this reframing, rather than trying to "save" or change these children, I've come to understand that my role is to support their inherent strengths. By sharing my perspective of children's strengths, others also begin to see them more clearly. In the same way that low expectations may be the most damning consequence of risk, high expectations may also be the greatest instigator for resilience.

Developing resilience

Research indicates that, even if their grades don't prove it, children who remain resilient in the midst of adversity tend to enjoy school. Outside the family, school is usually the most consistent institution in children's lives so it may be an important buffer for children facing difficult circumstances. The structure of the classroom environment provides some predictability in the midst of chaos. Children's sense of self-worth, control over their lives, and academic achievement may benefit from the opportunity to interact with additional supportive adults and peers. Relationships with teachers may be particularly important for traumatized children, who frequently display academic and behavior problems.

Given the potential for student-teacher relationships to positively affect children living in the midst of challenging circumstances, educators must think more deeply about how best to build relationships with these students. As children navigating challenging life circumstances come to trust their teachers more, they frequently become more extroverted, less moody, and demonstrate more positive emotions (Wright, 2007, 2010). As a result, they begin to receive more positive attention from teachers and peers, which strengthens their ability to regulate emotions, build confidence, and broaden their support network. Similarly, as teachers begin to see these children in a different light, they often begin to enjoy them more, gain energy from their love and affection, and feel like they're making a difference.

Building positive, respectful relationships is critical, but this is just the first step in fostering hope. Educators must create academic and social opportunities that allow students with challenging lives to experience success and feel pride in themselves. To imagine a world of goodness and possibilities, students must first believe such things about themselves. There are no shortcuts. Trust is lost much

more quickly than it is recovered. But consistency, a predictable classroom environment, a positive classroom culture, and targeted instructional strategies will eventually make a difference.

Educators can help this process by learning how to respond to the social, emotional, and academic needs of students growing up in challenging circumstances.

Social

Students with difficult lives sometimes come from homes where behavior is reinforced through violence and domination rather than rules and incentives. Expectations may be inconsistent and not clearly communicated. If such children are to learn a language other than fear and intimidation, educators must help them see the difference between rules and discipline. Consequently, educators must always emphasize that schools are nonviolent. They can discuss, rehearse, and frequently revisit rules, expectations, and rewards to remind students what is expected of them. When rules are broken, teachers should avoid battles for control or in any way intimidate students as a form of behavior management.

Emotional

Given the complexity of their emotions, children with unpredictable lives often struggle to understand and communicate their feelings. This makes it difficult for them to develop an appropriate response to their feelings and may lead to outbursts or impulsivity. Teaching students how to identify and discuss their feelings helps them regulate their emotions. Selecting books that showcase a variety of feelings, naming emotions in the classroom, and allowing students time and a safe space to calm down will also help them manage.

Schools also must provide access or referral to appropriate mental health, special education, and family support services. Though critically important, teachers and classroom-based supports may still not be enough to meet all of a child's or family's needs. Knowing when and how to advocate for additional services or an appropriate referral is critically important.

Academic

Because their lives frequently lack routines, systems, or plans, children living in the midst of chaos sometimes have difficulty understanding cause-and-effect relationships, recognizing sequences, and making predictions. Struggling with these basic skills may foster serious challenges in learning math, spelling, phonetics, reading comprehension, etc. Emphasizing these skills in the classroom, providing concrete examples, discussing the rationale for expectations and consequences, and using graphic

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organizers or other physical manipulatives may help reinforce these concepts. In addition, repeating information and communicating the same information in multiple ways will help increase the likelihood that children struggling to stay focused or who have zoned out will stay on track.

Conclusion

Though educators' hope for their students' futures frequently motivate our efforts, we must find ways to connect learning and its relevance to students' present circumstances and interests. If school is to become a priority for students too afraid to think about tomorrow, it must matter to them today. For these students, the future is far too uncertain and abstract. Many are unsure that tomorrow will come. As a result, too much focus on future attainment or schooling beyond the current level seems irrelevant or too far away to be meaningful. Educators must be creative in finding ways to help students see that they're important, that school is a safe haven for them, and that learning is relevant to their everyday lives. Fostering positive student-teacher relationships, culturally responsive teaching, and academic work that captures their imagination and ingenuity will never fail in this regard.

The necessity for such engagement and the potential consequences for children are great. When students are forced to choose between success at school and things that keep them safe at home, they will always choose safety. In other words, in the short term, hanging on to what is required for survival in their immediate lives has greater value to them, even if it jeopardizes their long-term options. Consequently, schools must not compete. Rather than devaluing what children bring with them into classrooms, educators must learn to honor how students' coping strategies are a source of strength in another part of their lives. Despite educators' best intentions, failure to do so pushes children away from embracing school as a safe and emotionally protective space. Indeed, as he well demonstrated, James will be resilient regardless — he is going to take care of himself. Educators must give him a pathway that allows him to take care of himself at school as well. Whether he does this in ways not harmful to himself or others is fundamentally what is at stake. ■

References

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