The 7 Cs: The Essential Building Blocks of Resilience

Bottom Line #1: Young people live up or down to expectations we set for them. They need adults who believe in them unconditionally and hold them to the high expectations of being compassionate, generous, and creative.

Competence: When we notice what young people are doing right and give them opportunities to develop important skills, they feel competent. We undermine competence when we don't allow young people to recover themselves after a fall.

Confidence: Young people need confidence to be able to navigate the world, think outside the box, and recover from challenges.

Connection: Connections with other people, schools, and communities offer young people the security that allows them to stand on their own and develop creative solutions.

Character: Young people need a clear sense of right and wrong and a commitment to integrity.

Contribution: Young people who contribute to the well-being of others will receive gratitude rather than condemnation. They will learn that contributing feels good, and may therefore more easily turn to others, and do so without shame.

Coping: Young people who possess a variety of healthy coping strategies will be less likely to turn to dangerous quick-fixes when stressed.

Control: Young people who understand privileges and respect are earned through demonstrated responsibility will learn to make wise choices and feel a sense of control.

Bottom Line #2: What we do to model healthy resilience strategies for our students is more important than anything we say about them.

[The 7 Cs are an adaptation from The Positive Youth Development movement. Rick Little and colleagues at The International Youth Foundation first described the 4 Cs of confidence, competence, connection, and character as the key ingredients needed to ensure a healthy developmental path. They later added contribution because youth with these essential 4 characteristics also contributed to society. The additional two C's – coping and control – allow the model to both promote healthy development and prevent risk.]

Competence

Competence is the ability or know-how to handle situations effectively. It's not a vague feeling or hunch that "I can do this." Competence is acquired through actual experience. Children can't become competent without first developing a set of skills that allows them to trust their judgments, make responsible choices, and face difficult situations. In thinking about your students' competence and how to fortify it, ask yourself:

- Do I help my students focus on their individual strengths and build on them?
- Do I notice what they does well or do I focus on their mistakes?
- When I need to point out a mistake, am I clear and focused or do I communicate that I believe he/she always messes up?
- Do I help them recognize what they have going for their selves?
- Am I helping them build the educational, social, and stress-reduction skills necessary to make them competent in the real world?
- Do I communicate in a way that empowers my students to make their own decisions or do I undermine their sense of competence by giving information in ways they can't grasp? In other words, do I lecture or do I facilitate thinking?
- Do I let them make safe mistakes so they have the opportunity to self-correct or do I try to protect them from every trip and fall?
- As I try to protect them, does my interference mistakenly send the message, "I don't think you can handle this?"
- Do I recognize the competencies of each student without comparison to peers?

Confidence

True confidence, the solid belief in one's own abilities, is rooted in competence. Children gain confidence by demonstrating their competence in real situations. Confidence is not warm-and-fuzzy self-esteem that supposedly results from telling kids they're special or precious. Children who experience their own competence and know they are safe and protected develop a deep-seated security that promotes the confidence to face and cope with challenges. When adults support children in finding their own islands of competence and building on them, they prepare kids to gain enough confidence to try new ventures and trust their abilities to make sound choices. In thinking about your students' degree of confidence, consider the following questions:

- Do I see the best in each student so that he/she can see the best in him/herself?
- Do I clearly express that I expect the best qualities (not achievements, but personal qualities such as fairness, integrity, persistence, and kindness) in each student?
- Do I help them recognize what they have done right or well?
- Do I treat them as incapable children or as youngsters learning to navigate their world?
- Do I praise often enough? Do I praise honestly about specific achievements or do I give such diffuse praise that it doesn't seem authentic?
- Do I catch them being good when they are generous, helpful, and kind or when they do something without being asked or cajoled?
- Do I encourage them to strive just a little bit farther because I believe they can succeed? Do I hold realistically high expectations?
- Do I unintentionally push them to take on more than they can realistically handle, causing them to stumble and lose confidence?
- When I need to criticize or correct, do I focus only on what what's been done wrong or do I remind them that they are capable of doing well?
- Do I avoid instilling shame?

Connection

Children with close ties to family, friends, school, and community are more likely to have a solid sense of security that produces strong values and prevents them from seeking destructive alternatives. Family is the central force in any child's life, but connections to civic, educational, religious, and athletic groups can also increase a young person's sense of belonging to a wider world and being safe within it. Some questions to ponder when considering how connected your child is to family and the broader world include:

- Do we build a sense of physical safety and emotional security within our school?
- Do my students know that I value them unconditionally?
- Do I understand that the challenges my students will put me through on the path towards independence are normal developmental phases or will I take them so personally that our relationship and my ability to effectively educate them will be harmed?
- Do I allow my students to have and express all types of emotions or do I suppress unpleasant feelings? Are they learning that going to other people for emotional support during difficult times is productive or shameful?
- Do we do everything to address conflict and work to resolve problems rather than let them fester?
- Do we build community (ie as a classroom, grade, team, and/or school)?
- Do I encourage students to take pride in the various ethnic, religious, or cultural groups to which they belong?
- Do I actively work on developing close relationships with others involved with each of my student including parents to foster healthy relationships and communication?
- Do I protect all my students?

Character

Children need a fundamental sense of right and wrong to ensure they are prepared to make wise choices, contribute to the world, and become stable adults. Children with character enjoy a strong sense of self-worth and confidence. They are more comfortable sticking to their own values and demonstrating a caring attitude toward others. Some basic questions to ask yourself include:

- Do I help my students understand how their behaviors affect other people in good and bad ways?
- Am I helping my students recognize themselves as a caring people?
- Do I allow them to clarify their own values?
- Do I allow them to consider right versus wrong and look beyond immediate satisfaction or selfish needs?
- Do I value my students so clearly that I model the importance of caring for others?
- Do I demonstrate the importance of community?
- Am I careful to avoid racist, ethnic, or hateful statements or stereotypes? Am I clear how I regard these thoughts and statements whenever and wherever my students are exposed to them?
- Do I role model how I think of others' needs when I make decisions or take actions?

Contribution

It is a powerful lesson when children realize that the world is a better place because they are in it. Children who understand the importance of personal contribution gain a sense of purpose that can motivate them. They will not only take actions and make choices that improve the world, but they will also enhance their own competence, character, and sense of connection. Teens who contribute to their communities will be surrounded by reinforcing thank you's instead of the low expectations and condemnation so many teens endure. Before we can foster this sense of contribution, here are some things to consider:

- Do I communicate to my students (at appropriate age levels, of course) that many people in the world do not have as much human contact, money, freedom, and security as they need?
- Do I teach the important value of serving others? Do I model generosity with my time, resources, and energy?
- Do I make clear to my students that I believe they can improve the world?
- Do I create opportunities for each student to contribute in some specific way?
- Do I search my students' circle for other adults who might serve as role models who contribute to their communities and the world? Do I use these adults as examples to encourage each student to be the best he/she can be?

Coping

Children who learn to cope effectively with stress are better prepared to overcome life's challenges. The best protection against unsafe, worrisome behaviors may be a wide repertoire of positive, adaptive coping strategies. Before we begin teaching children this repertoire of coping and stress-reduction skills, some basic questions to ask ourselves:

- Do I help students understand the difference between a real crisis and something that just feels like an emergency?
- Do I model positive coping strategies on a consistent basis?
- Do I allow children enough time to use imaginative play? Do I recognize that fantasy and play are childhood's tools to solve problems?
- Do I guide my students to develop positive, effective coping strategies?
- Do I believe that telling them to "just stop" the negative behaviors will do any good?
- Do I recognize that for many young people, risk behaviors are attempts to alleviate their stress and pain?
- If any of my students participate in negative behaviors, do I condemn them for it? Do I recognize that I may only increase the sense of shame and therefore drive them toward more negativity?
- Do I model problem-solving step by step or do I just react emotionally when I'm overwhelmed?
- Do I model the response that sometimes the best thing to do is conserve energy and let go of the belief that I can tackle all problems?
- Do I model the importance of caring for our bodies through exercise, good nutrition, and adequate sleep? Do I model relaxation techniques?
- Do I encourage creative expression?
- As I struggle to compose myself so I can make fair, wise decisions under pressure, do I model how I take control rather than respond impulsively or rashly to stressful situations?
- Do I create a school environment in which talking, listening, and sharing is safe, comfortable, and productive?

Control

When children realize that they can control the outcomes of their decisions and actions, they're more likely to know that they have the ability to do what it takes to bounce back. On the other hand, if adults make all the decisions, children are denied opportunities to learn control. A child who feels "everything always happens to me" tends to become passive, pessimistic, or even depressed. This child sees control as external—whatever he/she does really doesn't matter because there is no internal control of the outcome. But a resilient child knows that he/she has internal control. By individual choices and actions, children can determine the results. By doing so, they know that they can make a difference, which further promotes competence and confidence.

Some questions about control:

- Do I help my students understand that life's events are not purely random and most things happen as a direct result of someone's actions and choices?
- On the other hand, do I help students understand that they aren't responsible for many of the bad circumstances in life (such as parents' separation or divorce)?
- Do I help students think about the future, but take it one step at a time?
- Do I help students recognize even small successes so they can experience the knowledge that they can succeed?
- Do I help students understand that no one can control all circumstances, but everyone can shift the odds by choosing positive or protective behaviors?
- Do I understand that discipline is about teaching, not punishing or controlling? Do I use discipline as a means to help my students understand that actions produce certain consequences?
- Do I reward demonstrated responsibility with increased privileges?