Building Inner Resilience

Linda Lantieri

The capacity to be in control of one’s thoughts, emotions, and physiology can form an internal safety net preparing children to face the challenges and opportunities of life. This is the goal of the Inner Resilience Program in the New York City Schools.

On the morning of September 11, 2001, nobody could have predicted that within hours more than five thousand schoolchildren and two hundred teachers would be running for their lives. Adults in charge of this downtown Manhattan school knew that to make the right decisions they must stay calm and help their children do the same. In the midst of profound uncertainty and danger, they made the ultimate decision of their careers: saving the children would mean evacuating the school and running to safety. Though debris fell around them and confusion reigned, not a single student or teacher’s life was lost.

What got these remarkable adults and children through that day was not how well the children had performed on the last standardized test. That day, facing the deepest tests of life, the question of academic preparedness took a back seat to the question of inner preparedness. Somehow adults and students had the inner resources to connect to their deeper wisdom. In the midst of the devastation around them, they were able to remain calm and balanced. From such an internal state of relaxed alertness, they made the right decisions that would lead them all to safety.

Trauma is reflected in many other stresses in a world that becomes more uncertain every minute. A ten-year study showed that adults who are unable to manage stress effectively have a death rate 40 percent higher than non-stressed individuals (Eysenck, 1988). Children’s lives are much more stressful today as well. It is estimated that one out of five nine- to seventeen-year-olds has a diagnosable mental disorder (Shafer, Fischer, et al., 1996). An increasing number of children are entering schools in crisis, both cognitively and emotionally unprepared to learn.
The symptoms of unmanaged stress in children can be misinterpreted as intentional misbehavior. Reprimands do not calm stress nor help children pay attention. The brain's circuitry for calming and focusing is a work in progress: those neural systems are still growing. Yet adults can help them along by giving children systematic lessons that will strengthen these budding capacities (Goleman, 2008).

A crucial area of the brain in developing self-regulation is the prefrontal cortex, the brain's executive center. These circuits are essential for inhibiting disruptive emotional impulses and for paying attention—for calming as well as focusing. Without strategies for decreasing students' anxiety, less attention is available for learning. For example, a child panicked by a pop quiz will actually imprint that reaction rather than recall information. Distress kills learning. Freeing the mind from impulsivity and distress puts a child's mind in the best state for learning. Resilience science attests to the importance of having inner mechanisms which reduce the body's stress reaction (Goleman, 2008).

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As modern stresses accumulate, how can adults cultivate the habits of mind, body, and heart to cope with these pressures? How can young people develop the inner strength they need to meet both the intense challenges and the great opportunities that come their way? Both children and adults can benefit from learning practical stress management skills including the practice of taking regular moments of silence and stillness. Patrice Thomas (2003), in her book *The Power of Relaxation*, writes about a designated quiet time with children as "heart and soul time." What would happen if teachers and parents decided to help young people have a regular "heart and soul time" as a part of a family or classroom routine?

Studies have shown that children's social and emotional functioning and behavior begin to stabilize around the age of eight and can predict the state of their behavior and mental health later in life (Huesmann & Guerra, 1997). In other words, if children learn to express emotions constructively and engage in caring and respectful relationships before and while they are in lower elementary grades, they are more likely to avoid depression, violence, and other serious mental health problems as they grow older.

One strategy for strengthening social and emotional learning is regular contemplative practice that helps children focus their minds and calm their bodies. Given the busy, sometimes frenzied nature of life, reflective moments are often missing. As children experience quiet and stillness, they feel an inner balance and flow, which offsets the over-stimulation. The benefits of such a regular practice can include:

- Increased self-awareness and self-understanding
- Greater ability to relax the body and release physical tension
- Improved concentration and ability to pay attention
- The ability to deal with stress in a more relaxed manner
- Positive thinking with less intrusion of unwelcome thoughts

There is growing recognition of the benefits of systematically teaching adults and children to relax their bodies and focus their minds as a way of building resilience and improving learning. For example, research documents the benefits of the calming technique called Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR). Jon Kabat-Zinn, who founded the Stress Reduction Program at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, first studied the use of mindfulness technique with adult patients suffering from chronic pain. These patients showed lower blood pressure and reported a decrease of pain and an increased sense of well-being. Today, forms of MBSR are being used in more than 200 medical centers around the country for treating not only chronic pain but also cardiovascular disease and the effects of cancer therapy (Simon, 2005).
In 2001, Kabat-Zinn studied people who did not have a major medical problem but certainly had their share of the day stresses of life. After three months, the group who practiced these calming strategies regularly showed a 46 percent decrease in medical symptoms such as colds, headaches, etc.; a 44 percent decrease in psychological distress; and a 24 percent reduction in the stress response to everyday hassles. The control group showed no significant change in their levels of stress (Phalen, 2001).

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Richard Davidson, professor of psychology and psychiatry at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, has also been adding to the research about the benefits of teaching these calming strategies to adults. His studies show that meditation can reduce stress, promote well-being, strengthen the immune system, and increase the gray matter in the brain. A more recent study suggests that meditation can increase attention, which appears to be a trainable skill. Such discoveries may have profound implications for children and learning (Suttie, 2007).

After extensive studies of adults, more rigorous scientific research on the effects of these calming techniques on children is now under way in the United States and Canada. Through the services of Metis Associates Inc., The Inner Resilience Program is conducting original empirical research using an experimental design that will examine the impact that the Inner Resilience Program services have on a select group of New York City teachers, students, and classrooms. Sixty participants are in the study—half in the treatment group, and half in the control group. The results of this study will be available in the late fall of 2008.

Teachers in the Inner Resilience Program's intervention are exposed to calming and focusing techniques based on the newly published book, *Building Emotional Intelligence: Techniques to Cultivate Inner Strength in Children* (Lantieri, 2008). Daniel Goleman has contributed the Introduction and a CD of developmentally appropriate guided practices for children aged five to twelve and over. The program focuses on teaching students two practices: relaxing the body through a progressive muscle relaxation exercise and body-scan, and focusing the mind through a mindfulness exercise.

The teachers who are part of the research group in New York City are teaching these contemplative practices as part of their regular curriculum and creating the conditions in the classroom that are welcoming this way of being. They have shared many anecdotes about how their students are responding to learning these concrete capacities of focusing the mind and calming the body.

One of the strategies for developing inner resilience is to encourage teachers to create "peace corners" for students. This is a special place set aside either in home or classroom where children can go whenever they need to regain their inner balance and flow. Peace corners can be used when anyone feels overwhelmed, stressed, angry, or otherwise out of control emotionally. Vera Slywinsky describes the experience she and her children had with setting up a peace corner:
The most astounding development of introducing these techniques into my classroom has been the children's interest in the peace corner. They have brought beautiful photos, postcards of warm and exotic places, and stuffed animals to decorate our corner. And they have not been at all hesitant to utilize it. Within the first week of its creation, I had a student whose uncle died after a long battle with cancer in Ecuador. Unfortunately the family couldn't afford to attend the funeral. She was grateful for the peace corner. Another child was evicted from her home. The peace corner brought much comfort to her. Her family is now back in their space and okay but this student was able to find a way to deal with those unpleasant feelings at school so she could in fact be more ready to learn. This simple addition in our classroom has allowed my students to seek peace amidst the turmoil they face in their lives daily... My children have collectively forged a safe place to begin to heal, survive, and appreciate the joy we have in supporting each other!

Many courageous educators and parents are breaking new ground and teaching children these contemplative practices. A window of opportunity exists right now in society for these kinds of approaches to make their way into homes and schools. It is essential for children to learn new ways to have their human spirits uplifted and their inner lives nourished as a normal, natural part of their growing up experience. And, as Gandhi prompted, “We have to start with the children.”


References


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