



The North Carolina School Age Trauma and Resilience Resource Series

Section Two: Supporting Student Resiliency

The North Carolina Child Care Resource and Referral School Age Initiative

The effects of trauma are real, but they don't have to be permanent. Trauma induced by adversity, abuse, hunger, and injustice stands as a roadblock for many students in our state; however, resilience is attainable when students are given the right tools to achieve success. Access to quality school age programming is one of the most effective tools in guiding students towards this road to resiliency. School age programs offer safety to the abused, food to the hungry, and comfort to those students who feel that all is lost.

Section Two of The North Carolina School Age Trauma and Resilience Series looks specifically at the foundation of student resiliency and trauma management. This section focuses on the importance of creating an effective school age program culture that is based on trauma-informed relationship building, family engagement, and environment set up.

The North Carolina School Age Trauma and Resilience Resource Series is developed in coordination with the NC Division of Child Development and Early Education, NC CCR&R Council, and Southwestern Child Development Commission.



What is Resilience

Think about a time when you skinned your knee growing up. Was it a painful experience? After the initial shock of falling, you probably wiped up any blood, washed the impacted area, popped on some antibiotic ointment, and hopefully added a Band-Aid. After a few weeks, your body worked to heal the small wound, and depending on the severity of the fall, your knee patched up with little to no mark. Essentially, your body did what it was designed to do...heal itself.

But what if you weren't able to properly tend to your skinned knee? Maybe you couldn't clean it, or apply any antibiotic medication. Maybe, instead of letting your body heal itself, you constantly rubbed or scratched the scrape. The results of this injury would likely be more serious. The wound might take longer to heal. It could leave a scar, or possibly develop an infection. By not taking the necessary precautions, your body could not fully recover back to normal.

We can apply this concept of physical healing to the the mental and emotional healing associated with trauma. Like every physical cut or scrape, each traumatic event experienced during childhood leaves an emotional cut or scrape.

If left untreated, these emotional scrapes can turn into scars that can have life altering effects.

Healing with Resiliency

As a school age professional, you can help students learn how to heal the emotional scars associated with trauma by facilitating the process of RESILIENCE.

The American Pediatric Association defines resilience as "the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, fear or significant source of stress (APA, *Building Your Resilience*, 2012). Like reading and writing, resilience is a learned skill for students that takes time and effort to understand and hone.

In her book *The Deepest Well* (2018), researcher and pediatrician Nadine Harris highlights that children and students approach the process of resilience differently depending on personal circumstances and individual life events. One student's road to recovery from abuse, neglect, hunger, and shame might look completely different than another child from the same classroom or household. For school age providers, our goal is to help students discover their own personal resilience in a safe and nurturing learning environment.

Setting up the Road to Resiliency

Even though resilience is a personal journey for students, school age programs play a huge role in the development and integration of resilience skills. Quality school age programs provide a solid foundation for the development of resilience by:

- providing a safe space for students to play, socialize, and learn
- helping students focus on life skills and academic work
- teaming students up with positive role models and adults
- providing students with healthy meals and snacks
- connecting students and families with other social support programs in the community

Research produced by the Vermont Department of Children and Families shows that frequent access to out-of-school programming is an instrumental tool to help students develop resilience and emotional literacy. This research highlights that out-of-school programs help students build strong relationships with quality role models and develop the coping skills needed to address current and future trauma (Vermont DCF, *Afterschool Programs: Building Youth Resilience*, 2018).

However, even with these successes, more can always be done to help students build resilience skills and address personal trauma. Take a moment and reflect on your school age program. What areas can be built upon to help students thrive emotionally? Are there any gaps in your personal teaching approach that need attention in order to foster student resilience?

The remainder of this guide will look specifically at student resilience through the parameters of program environments, relationships, and family engagement. As you read through the following pages, think about HOW you currently incorporate these three important elements in your program, and WHAT you can do to take these concepts to the next level for students.



QUICK REMINDER

As we delve into the process of helping students build resilience, we must understand what causes childhood trauma. For a more in-depth overview of recognizing trauma in your school age program, refer to Section One of the North Carolina School Age Trauma and Resilience Resource Series.

The top 10 causes for school age trauma indicated by the Adverse Childhood Experiences Study (Kaiser Permanente/Center for Disease Control):

- 1 **Neglect**
- 2 **Physical Abuse**
- 3 **Verbal Abuse**
- 4 **Drug Abuse**
- 5 **Hunger/Poverty**
- 6 **Domestic Violence**
- 7 **Mental Health Issues**
- 8 **Divorce**
- 9 **Incarceration**
- 10 **Sexual Abuse**



Resilience and Environments



Having a safe environment to learn and socialize is key to building student resilience. Psychologist Ruhuldeep Gill highlights that safe "resilience spaces" provide victims of trauma with a secure area to open up emotionally, connect with peers, and explore recovery without fear of retribution (Gill, *From Safe Spaces to Resilient Places*, 2017). This safe space is fundamental for students who have experienced home-based trauma and emotional stress. Safe school age programs give students the ability to separate from violence, feed their stomachs, bond with caring group leaders, and grow academically.

Here are some simple ways that you can help develop your school age environment into a safe "resilience space":

- Create a bully-free program culture that embraces the contributions and creativity of each student. Reinforce the value of each student and redirect toxic and critical student behavior.
- Invest in program-wide trauma-informed professional development training with your local Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR&R) organization. Many local CCR&R organizations provide resilience focused trainings for free.
- Connect your program with community based social organizations that positively impact the surrounding population. Providing opportunities for students to volunteer develops resilience by reinforcing empathy and leadership skills.
- Think about the comfort of your classroom environment. Provide multiple soft areas for students to sleep and relax. Sleep deprivation is a common result of home-based trauma, and having a safe space to rest can help students dealing with trauma re-energize.
- Provide students with a quiet place to do homework and learn. Completing school work could be hard for students dealing with home-based trauma and abuse. Setting up an intentional learning area can provide the time and space needed to stay on track at school.
- Reflect on the cultural atmosphere of your program. Presenting a diverse selection of cultures in a positive venue can help build personal pride and resilience for students dealing with race-based trauma and abuse.
- Be intentional about your program's nutrition policy. Many students dealing with trauma also suffer from a lack of nutrition. Having access to healthy snacks and extra food can help the body heal and recover emotionally.



Providing students with play-based school age environments is a great way to develop resilience skills. Research conducted by *Scientific American* notes that daily engagement in play-centered programs is fundamental for the cognitive and social development of school age students aged 5-12 years (*Scientific American*, 2020). Play-based environments allow students to disconnect from the stress created by outside traumatic events. These environments spur higher levels of critical thinking and brain function that are often weakened by the influx of cortisol produced by trauma.

When crafting play areas for your school age program, reflect specifically on the quality of materials provided to students throughout the day. Incorporating materials that spur critical thinking and positive social development opportunities go a long way to support resilience in a fun and stress-free atmosphere.

Below are some easy ways to build student resilience through play-based environments:

- Take advantage of the outdoors. Large outdoor spaces help students decompress and recalibrate their emotions. For students showcasing challenging behaviors associated with trauma, try incorporating short outdoor walks into their daily schedule.
- Focus your environment and schedule on peer engagement. Trauma is often associated with feelings of loneliness and shame. Providing students with group play options breaks down feelings of internal isolation and helps students build resilience-minded peer relationships.

- Incorporate learning materials that promote emotional expression and personal reflection. Materials like journals and art supplies offer a safe way for students to express trauma and stress. Age appropriate trauma-focused books are also a great tool to help students develop resilience.
- Have group leaders sit and play with students during activity time. Many students dealing with trauma and stress yearn for positive adult support and attention. By getting on the student's eye-level and playing, group leaders can help students develop trust, communication, and positive emotional connection.
- Highlight student input with material selection and activity planning. One of the most detrimental effects of trauma is the loss of personal power. Allowing students to have input in play builds resilience by emphasizing their personal contribution to the classroom community. Have students sit in during lesson plan development and offer ideas. Hold classroom votes on what games to play, and let students choose special materials from the storage closet.

Check out these great resilience activity resources

Edutopia

www.edutopia.org

Virtual Lab Schools

www.virtuallabschool.org

National Summer Learning Association

www.summerlearning.org





Resilience and Relationships

Positive relationships are key to building resilience. Researcher Jennifer Theiss highlights that developing strong relationships and communication with a small group of trusted individuals is one of the quickest ways to develop personal resilience and process trauma. She emphasizes that relationships with open communication help individuals process the effects of emotional distress, and reestablish control over situations that cause prolonged stress (Theiss, *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 2018).

For school age programs, fostering positive relationships goes hand-in-hand with building student resilience. Data from the Waterford Organization states that positive relationships between students and teachers drastically reduces trauma-based outcomes like absenteeism, drop-out rates, and school violence. Students who form a strong relationship with at least one school age professional are more likely to display signs of self-confidence, leadership initiative, and future goal setting (Waterford, 2019).

Along with developing strong teacher-student relationships, high quality school age programming must also foster positive peer-peer interactions. Instances of bullying and hazing are disastrous to students dealing with the emotional toil of trauma and stress. Recent statistics from the National Bullying Prevention Center (NBPC) states that nearly 50% of the nation's teens have experienced bullying at school, with mental effects ranging from

depression and anxiety to self-harm and attempted suicide. Further data provided by the NBPC states that school age programs that implement anti-bullying initiatives record a 25% decrease in bullying, and an increase in student emotional development (NBPC, *Bullying Statistics*, 2020).

Here are some simple ways to help your school age program foster resilience through positive relationships.

- Take time to sit, listen, and play with each student in your group throughout the week. Checking in with students builds trust, and helps them know that you care about their well-being. You can easily interact with students during meal times, group activities, outdoor visits and walks, and gross motor play.
- Reflect on your communication with students. Having a warm tone with students helps develop strong, trusting relationships. A friendly demeanor also models positive communication techniques to the entire group.
- Help students develop empathy and relationship skills by providing volunteer opportunities during program hours. Banding together to help others builds resilience by highlighting attributes like leadership, compassion, and teamwork.
- Foster resilience by rewarding positive relationship skills. Let students know that you notice acts of kindness and that you appreciate their attempts to build others up. Giving attention to positive relationships helps reinforce a resilience-minded program culture.



Resilience and Family Engagement

Research gathered by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention highlights that a majority of childhood trauma emerges from household stress. From periods of poverty and hunger to instances of abuse and neglect, the emotional climate of the home greatly impacts the resilience of school age students (CDC, *Adverse Child Experiences Study*).

The development of school age resilience depends on how programs support the emotional development of family units. In a 2019 article published in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Health*, researchers Susanne Alm, Sara Laftman, and Hannes Bohnam highlight that the trauma and stress created by dysfunctional families act as a primary factor in the emotional regression of students during childhood. Moreover, they conclude that home-based stress and chaos can easily erode positive emotional skills developed in school based environments (Alm, Laftman, Bohnam, 2019).

Positively engaging and supporting families dealing with trauma promotes the continuation of student resilience skills developed during program hours. If we help families create a safer and more stable home life, then we help reduce domestic stress for students and aid emotional healing.

Take a moment to reflect on how your school age program engages with families. What supports do you offer family units? How can you build your school age program to help students develop resilience outside of your care?

Here are some ways your program can help foster resilience through family engagement:

- Schedule regular virtual meetings with parents in your program to assess stress factors. Use these meetings to have families share strategies and social supports with other families in the program. These meetings are a great way to show families that they are not alone. It also provides individuals with a way to connect with others and create extended support networks that they might not initially know about.
- Connect with mental health and social support organizations in your area. Take time to build relationships with these organizations, and connect families to their resources. You can have representatives from these organizations attend virtual support meetings with your program's families or supply literature to hand out.
- Team up with other school age programs in your area to promote mental health and social support events. Hosting larger virtual events with other programs will build community solidarity and increase the impact of your message.
- Create a mental health and social support resource table in a visible area for families. Use the table to highlight agencies and public departments offering support services to families. This is also a great area to include services like tutoring and employment opportunities.
- Build close relationships with your families on a daily basis. Take time to ask them HOW they are doing. These personal relationships can help those who feel that they are alone and isolated.

Resilience Resources At A Glance

Licensing and Program Support

North Carolina Division of Child Development and Early Education

Website: ncchildcare.ncdhhs.gov
Phone: 919.814.6300

North Carolina CCR&R Council

Website: childcarerrnc.org
Phone: 704.376.6697

Child Care Health and Safety Resource Center

Website: healthychildcare.unc.edu
Phone: 1.800.367.2229

North Carolina Rated License Assessment Project

Website: ncrlap.org
Phone: 866.362.7527

Nutrition and Food Security

North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services Nutrition Services

Website: nutritionnc.com
Phone: 919.707.5800

Feeding the Carolinas

Website: feedingthecarolinas.org
Phone: 336.365.3450

Food Bank of Central and Eastern NC

Website: foodbankcenc.org
Phone: 919.875.0707

North Carolina State Extension

Website: ces.ncsu.edu
Phone: 919.515.2813

Mental Health Services

North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services: MHDDSAS

Website: ncdhhs.gov/divisions/mhddsas
Phone: 984.236.5000

Program Connection

Local Interagency Coordinating Councils

Website: beearly.nc.gov
Phone: 919.707.5520

NC Early Education Coalition

Website: ncearlyeducationcoalition.org
Email: info@ncearlyeducationcoalition.org

NC Center for Afterschool Programs

Website: ncafterschool.org
Phone: 919.781.6833

Family Support

Family Support Network of North Carolina

Website: fsnnc.org
Phone: 1.800.852.0042



North Carolina School Age Initiative

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