Resilience is the happy knack of being able to bungy jump through the pitfalls of life. Even when hardship and adversity arise, it is as if the person has an elasticised rope around them that helps them to rebound when things get low and to maintain their shape as a person. Studies focusing on resilience look at what protects children against difficult, aversive and harmful life events.

From a series of studies (Brooks, 1994, Butler, 1997, Compas, 1995, Ferguson & Lynskey, 1996; Hawley and DeHaan, 1996; Resnick, Harris, & Blum, 1993; Spaccarelli & Kim, 1996; Waldt, 1996; Volin & Volin, 1995, 1993) the factors presented in Table 1 have been found to contribute to resilience in young people from the long term consequences of adversity.

The present study draws upon two fields of research in order to investigate those factors that promote resilience in young Australians.

Firstly, the work of Michael Resnick and colleagues (1993, 1997) who found in large scale surveys of young people in Minnesota, the factors that contributed to well being in young people were:

- Family connectedness
- School connectedness
- Church attendance
- Belief in society
- Parent-family connectedness and perceived school connectedness were found to be protective against emotional distress, suicidal thoughts and actions, violent acts, and the use of cigarettes, alcohol and marijuana (Resnick, Bearman, Blum et al., 1997)

Secondly, the project draws on previous life trajectory research which seeks to demonstrate how people get through different developmental stages (Compas et al., 1995; Kagan, 1991). Five main developmental pathways have been identified for adolescents:

1. Stable positive functioning
2. Stable poor functioning
3. Adolescent hummus or recovery
4. Adolescent decline - often late in the adolescent years
5. Mid Adolescent Dip

The main focus of this project was to investigate what is needed to shift young people from a pathway of poor functioning or one of adolescent decline to a trajectory of recovery.

The Resilience project has investigated protective factors as they apply to Australian young people.


Report compiled with the assistance of Jacqui Brouwer

| 1998 |
| Resilience - A Connect Project |
| In This Issue |
| Protective factors as perceived by Victorian school students |
| Resilience and families |
| Schools and the promotion of resilience |
| Young people, well-being and help seeking |
| Recommended interventions |

From Warrnambool to Warrnambool, Montrose to Melton, Rainbow to Ringwood, Box Hill to Bendigo, across Victoria Year 11 students have been meeting each month in focus groups.

These groups have discussed how to help young people feel more connected to their schools and families. They are helping us discover the factors that protect young people against substance abuse and depression.
### Table 1. Risk & Resilience Factors for Young People

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Risk Factors</th>
<th>Protective Factors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Availability of Drugs</td>
<td>Cultures of co-operation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Media portrayals of violence</td>
<td>Stability &amp; connection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Transitions &amp; mobility</td>
<td>Low neighbourhood attachment &amp; disorganisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low neighbourhood attachment &amp; disorganisation + community disorganisation</td>
<td>Good relationship with an adult outside the family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Poverty</td>
<td>Opportunities for meaningful contribution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School</td>
<td>Detachment from school</td>
<td>A sense of belonging &amp; fitting in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Academic failure, especially in middle years</td>
<td>Positive achievements &amp; evaluations at school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Early &amp; persistent antisocial behaviour</td>
<td>Having someone outside your family who believes in you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low parental interest in education</td>
<td>Attendance at pre-school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>Family history of problematic alcohol or drug usage</td>
<td>A sense of belonging or connectedness to family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Inappropriate family management</td>
<td>Feeling loved and respected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Family conflict</td>
<td>Proactive problem solving &amp; minimal conflict during infancy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Parental alcohol / drugs use that interferes with family rituals</td>
<td>Maintenance of family rituals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Harsh / coercive and/or inconsistent parenting</td>
<td>Warm relationship with at least one parent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Marital instability or conflict</td>
<td>Absence of divorce during adolescence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Favourable parental attitudes towards risk taking behaviours</td>
<td>A “good fit” between parents &amp; child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual/Peer</td>
<td>Constitutional factors, alienation, rebelliousness, hyperactivity, novelty</td>
<td>Temperament / activity level, social responsivity, autonomy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>seeing seeking behaviour</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Seeing peers taking drugs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Friends who engage in problem behaviour</td>
<td>Developed a special talent, curiosity &amp; zest for life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Favourable attitudes towards problem behaviour</td>
<td>Work success during adolescence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Early initiation of the problem behaviour</td>
<td>High intelligence (not when paired with sensitive temperament)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Immediate Recommendations from this study:**

1. Develop a school culture that promotes belonging, connectedness and allows students to feel that they can fit in. This may involve developing strong positive peer networks, re-structuring schools to promote relationships and self-esteem and to reduce student anonymity.

2. Provide programs to assist students to develop coping strategies and problem solving skills at transition points especially in Years 6 and 7.

3. Teaching styles - increase the level of interest students have in subject areas by incorporating multi-media into teaching styles. Focus on mastery learning in Year 7.

4. Parenting programs - assisting parents to join the school community as active participants is vital if schools are to take a strong preventative approach.

5. Community involvement - especially in Year 9 look for ways to involve the community in providing occupational experiences for young people.

**Acknowledgments**

This project would not have been possible without the students who were prepared to give their viewpoints and opinions openly and honestly and the focus group facilitators. We would particularly like to thank the following people as well as acknowledging our ongoing debt to them:


The following schools should also be acknowledged for allowing their students to be involved and for supporting the Resilience project:

- Altona Secondary College, Balwyn Secondary College, Blackburn High School
- Bunyip Secondary College, Cranbourne College, Catholic Regional College
- Warracknabeal Secondary College, De La Salle College, Drouin Secondary College
- Edenhope College, Coriole College, Grovedale Secondary College
- Hopetoun Secondary College, Heathdale Secondary College, Horsham Secondary College
- Horsham College, Kaniva Secondary College, Killester College
- Korumburra Secondary College, Murrumda Secondary College, Mirboo North Secondary/Mumbulla College, Monterey Secondary College, Morphettville Secondary College
- Mornington Secondary College, Mortlake Secondary College, Newhaven College, Nhill College, North Geelong Secondary College, Numurkah Primary School, Noble Park Secondary College
- Our Lady of the Sacred Heart College, Rainbow Secondary College, Ringwood Secondary College
- Sebastian College, St Brigid’s College, St Joseph’s College, South Geelong Secondary College, Springvale Secondary, Vermont Secondary College

**AND MOST OF ALL, THE STUDENTS!**
What young people do to keep healthy

- Healthy diet 93%
- Exercise 84%
- Keep happy 79%
- Have a social life 14%
- Don’t smoke, drink alcohol or take drugs 12.3%
- Support and love 12.3%

Types of Social Connectedness

- Sporting clubs 24.6%
- Peer based activities 18.4%
- Youth & Church groups 5.3%
- Sport & Church groups 5.3%
- Sport & music 5.3%

Young people who feel they belong were described as having a large group of friends and enjoying life. They are seen as more physical and sporting and of friends and enjoying life. They are

Young people who feel they don’t belong, do not have as big a social group, seem “down”, don’t enjoy things, may get into trouble and are less confident.

“Conversations, sharing the ‘goss’, stories about friends and parties help you understand yourself better”

Depression

Most young people said that the signs they use to tell if a friend is depressed include: being quiet, sad, withdrawn, not being their normal selves, moodiness, tiredness, and being unfriendly.

74.6% would suggest that a depressed friend speak to someone, 29.6% would suggest that they go out and have fun, 14.9% suggested trying to solve the problem, 7% thought being active and 4.4% thought advising them to relax would be helpful.

“They reckon the people most at risk are those that have no area of their lives where they can call themselves a success. Almost anything can happen to you and you’ll weather it if you have something in your head which says ‘I’ve been successful before, I can succeed with conquering this problem now’.”

Only a small proportion of young people who experiment with alcohol and drugs go on to develop substance abuse or dependence problems. It is useful to distinguish between young people who experiment with alcohol and drugs and those who go on to develop problematic substance abuse patterns.

Young people who experiment can be at risk particularly from their behaviours when experimenting such as accidents, violence, and risky sexual behaviour.

Programs that have aimed to prohibit drug use have had limited effectiveness in reducing rates of experimentation.

Young people who are likely to experiment need to know ways to minimise the harm of their experimentation.

Another group of young people go beyond experimentation to develop substance abuse problems and dependence. Many of these will have associated difficulties such as depression and psychological problems.

The probability of onset of alcohol & drug abuse peaks in 15 -19 year olds. This is also a time when many young people develop depression. At highest risk of developing depression is the 15 to 17 year old age group.

It has been possible to isolate those protective factors that buffer young people against the likelihood of developing substance abuse.

Where young people go for help

Who young people seek help from outside school

- Parent 60.0%
- Sibling 50.0%
- Friend 40.0%
- External family 30.0%
- Priest 20.0%
- Partner 10.0%
- Other 0.0%
- Don’t know 0.0%

Schools

Schools can prevent the onset, severity and duration of substance abuse as well as delinquency, bullying and violence, by developing a culture that promotes belonging and gives students a sense of fitting in and the possibility of success.

School-based interventions are successful, particularly if they address the culture of the school and are interactive.

Family

Assisting and supporting families to develop more collaborative, compassionate and consistent parenting styles is an important element in reducing substance abuse.

Individual / Peer

Lowering the incidence of substance abuse in young people is linked to the prevention of depression and the promotion of coping skills & self-esteem. Assisting students to develop positive linkages with peers is also vital, especially at secondary school entry.
Method

Schools were selected in order to represent a wide range of metropolitan, rural and regional centres. Similarly, coverage of state, independent and Catholic school systems were also included in the sampling frame.

Schools were invited to select ten students who were in year 10 in 1997 and who would be in year 11 in 1998 to form a focus group that would meet monthly. In doing so, they were asked to select students who would be representative of the range of students in the year level at that school. However, schools were also asked to select a group that would be workable in terms of conducting discussions.

Focus groups were conducted from late 1997, and continued throughout the 1998 school year.

Each month, students were given a one-page survey to complete independently. These survey sheets were collected by the focus group facilitator and placed in an envelope and sealed in front of the students. A list of issues to be discussed was then read out by the facilitator who then noted down the main themes of the students’ discussion.

The results were analysed using SPSS for quantitative analysis, and the Nud*ist program for qualitative analysis.

The validity of the data was checked by taking the results back to students for verification and further elaboration.

Focus groups were established in 45 secondary schools 25 in metropolitan areas and 20 rural schools. This included seven Catholic schools and one independent school.

Protective Factors as Rated by Young People- addendum 1999

The following protective factors were developed and tested in three phases:

1. Open-ended questions were given to focus group participants regarding the factors that contribute to well-being in families, young people and schools. These responses were then analysed into themes using the Nud*ist qualitative analysis package.

2. The themes were then fed back to focus groups to check whether there were issues that had been missed.

3. The list of protective factors were then rated by Year 11 students from 14 secondary schools across Victoria. The final sample consisted of 1, 510 Year 11 students (717 males and 791 females, 2 did not indicate sex). One quarter of participants were born outside of Australia.

The protective factors as perceived by Victorian school students are as follows:

- Rank Order
- Mean Ranking
- % who believe the factor applies to them

1. Family connectedness 2.24 93.2
2. Peer connectedness 2.63 96.8
3. Feeling that your family respects your decisions 4.19 85.2
4. Having good teachers 5.39 78.7
5. Fitting in at school 5.39 79.0
6. Feeling respected by teachers 5.47 76.9
7. Having an adult outside the family who takes an interest in you 5.90 64.2
8. Sport (7 for boys) 6.64 53.5
9. Community connectedness 6.71 58.5
10. Religion and Spirituality 7.33 40.3

1. Family Connectedness

Family connectedness (feeling loved by your family) was rated highest by both male and female students

2. Peer Connectedness

A sense of belonging to a friendship group was more universally applicable than family connectedness, indicating that for a group of young people who may be alienated from their families, peer connectedness may be the most important protective factor.

3. Feeling your Family respects your Decisions

In accordance with many studies which indicate that effective parenting of adolescents involves providing opportunities for age-appropriate autonomy, the present results indicate that having a family who respects your decisions and helps you to understand yourself better were seen as strong protective factors.

4. Fitting In at School & Having good teachers

School is important as either a place of learning, as a place where adults outside the family are accessible or where you can belong to a social group.

Self-Esteem Builders Uncovered!

When asked what helps young people to feel good about themselves, the following things were mentioned:

- Friends 40%
- Success 24%
- Compliments 20%
- Support 20%
- Myself 10%
- Being loved 8%
- Appearance 4%

**“To know that you can trust someone and that you are trusted…”**

For those students who held spiritual and religious beliefs, their faith was a vital protective factor for Australian young people. Being well connected to peers was rated as the second most important protective factor and was the factor that applied to most young people.

Slightly over 96% of young people felt that being connected to peers was an important protective factor in their own lives.

Young people expected parents to make rules and to set boundaries and felt that this contributed to their well-being.

**“I was glad when my parents grounded me. I lost their trust. I had to gain it back.”**

Andrew Fuller, Karen McGraw, Melinda Goodyear, 1998

The focus group from Vermont Secondary College

How young people cope

The coping mechanisms used most frequently by young people include:

- Talking to friends 85.1%
- getting angry 56.1%
- bottle it up 51.6%
- tell my parents 59.5%
- Use drugs/alcohol 36.6%
- Do nothing 30.7%
- Pray 18.4%
- Talk to a counsellor 5.3%
- Talk to a teacher 7.0%

Other coping mechanisms that were mentioned included strength of will and relaxation.

How families can help young people feel better about themselves

**“Knowing that they love you even if they don’t always show it”**

Support 61%
Love 24%
Trust 9%
Respect 8%
Understanding 6%
Fun 5%
Nothing 2%
What helps students feel as if they belong at school?

Students feel they belong at a school when they have friends there and they feel the school is concerned about them and they are treated as individuals.

Some students commented that some schools seem to care more about their image and presentation than their students.

Feeling encouraged by teachers was a common theme for students to have a sense of school connectedness.

"A teacher needs to reward things you're doing well and notice you're trying despite bad things you're doing or might have done."

Others commented that students had a role to play in belonging to schools, "Schools could do anything, but in end it is up to kids".

What young people would say to a friend who was thinking of dropping out of school.

For most students it would depend on why their friend was leaving. If it was to go and begin a career then most thought they should leave especially if there is nothing for them at school. However, if they were leaving because of bullying or difficulty with staff, it was felt that it was more important to resolve problem. "you will always be faced with situations like this, no point running away".

Others would suggest to their friend "well, go and experience the real world, then you'll come back knowing how hard it is".

How much homework do young people think they should do on a week day?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Hours</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primary School</td>
<td>20 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 7</td>
<td>45 mins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 8</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 9</td>
<td>1 hour 15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 10</td>
<td>1 hour 30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 11</td>
<td>2 hours 15 mins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 12</td>
<td>3 hours</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

51.8% believe students should be expected to do homework on weekends.

"If parents said to most kids that they could leave school, they probably wouldn't."

"Teachers need to encourage, to be compassionate, with their students if they wish for them to feel they belong."

How schools could be improved

Most of the comments related to the attitude of teachers. To keep students, teachers should treat kids with more respect, as an equal, with human to human contact. Discuss their needs with them and don't hound the students.

"Don't tell us, talk to us and listen to us".

Others mentioned keeping the timetable flexible, using different and more interesting methods of teaching and more funding which may lead to less teacher stress and a better atmosphere for students.

Suggestions included: individualising programs, making classes more interesting, school radio stations, ethnic equality and inter-mixing, real life topics, work requirements should be organized so it is evenly spread out, increase subject choice, greater amount of outdoor education, softer chairs, a two minute break between double periods, more activities, camps, outings and productions, and making the school less impersonal.

What do young people think? Findings from focus groups

Our focus group from North Geelong

How schools could be improved

Our focus group from Monterey Secondary College

"If parents said to most kids that they could leave school, they probably wouldn’t.

"Teachers need to encourage, to be compassionate, with their students if they wish for them to feel they belong."

The Xavier College focus group

Families and Resilience

Teen Shock! Parents Popular

In shock news today, it has been revealed that 88% of teenagers actually like their parents. They are less sure that their friends like their parents but they are sure of their own.

Most say they expect their parents to nag them about homework and school and over 60% expect that their parent(s) will set rules that they disagree with. Support, love, security and belonging are the main positive aspects of families according to young people.

"If parents said to most kids that they could leave school, they probably wouldn’t."

"Teachers need to encourage, to be compassionate, with their students if they wish for them to feel they belong."

The focus group from Korumburra Secondary College

"Teachers need to encourage, to be compassionate, with their students if they wish for them to feel they belong."

Family connectedness

How much homework do young people think they should do on a week day?

What teenagers think parents worry about

What young people say they worry about

Andrew Fuller, Karen McGraw & Melinda Goodyear, 1998
Mother

"mum more of a friend, dad more of an advisor"

The most important role of a mother is to nurture 44.7%, love 34.1%, just being there 20%, guidance 17.6% & understanding 8.2%

"Want mum to care and be interested but not over the top. Also don’t want a mum who couldn’t care where you were"

A good relationship between mother & child involves communication 43.9%, understanding 24.7%, love 23.5%, trust 17.6%, care 16.5%, time 15.3%, getting along 7.1% & laughter 3.5%

"Don’t want a mum who wears your clothes and tries to be one of your friends. Want a groovy mum but one who respects her age"

Ways mothers could improve their relationships with their children: love 45.9%, communication 30.6%, being there 25.9%, teaching 23.5%, understanding 22.4%, time 17.6%, security 16.5%, independence 9.4% respect 9.4%

"Annun should have her own time too. Shouldn’t just live for children. Places too higher expectations on children than"

"It shows they care if they ask ‘have you got homework?’ even if we wished they didn’t ask."

Father

A good relationship between a father & his child involves talking 37.3%, loving 21.3%, trusting 21.3%, respect 18.7%, friendship 18.7%, understanding 16% & guidance 8%.

“When you live with your dad you often want less contact & more freedom but when you don’t live with your dad you usually want much more contact.”

Most important role of a father is to teach 24%, care 22.7%, just being there 20%, love 13.3%, discipline 10.7%, security 10.7%

“Not enough fathers praise their kids but mums do”

What fathers can do to improve their children’s well-being

Be helpful 45.3%
Communicate 42.7%
Love 29.3%
Time 26%
Teach 21.3%
Active involvement in their child’s life 18.7%
Security 13.3%
Money 12%
Respect 8%

“Knowing when not to stick their nose in and also knowing when they are needed.”

64% believe that fathers should be involved in their children’s education by helping with school work 20% or going to parent–teacher interviews 6.7%

How Much Pocket Money?

91.8% of young people think that they should be expected to do jobs or chores for their pocket money!

Young people say the following amount of pocket money is reasonable:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Amount</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Year 7</td>
<td>$8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 8</td>
<td>$10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 9</td>
<td>$13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 10</td>
<td>$17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 11</td>
<td>$23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 12</td>
<td>$27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“They give it (pocket money) for responsibility – why should they tell us what to spend it on?”

Fitting in at school

Most students felt that friendships and socialising were the most important factors in liking school, followed by the curriculum, particular subjects and of course, the breaks.

Positive aspects of schools

Positive aspects of schools included socialising with friends, the curriculum, particular subjects, learning, being prepared for the future and (good) teachers.

“School is like a second home you spend more of your waking time at school, you see more of your teachers than you see of your parents. You should see it like that, a second home”

Some students commented on the importance of the physical aspects of schools mentioning the size of the student population, the location and the appearance as factors that contribute to their sense of linkage to the school.

How you feel you belong to a school when everyone is proud of it. It flows on from one group to the next. It’s related to people within a school and the way a school looks. A well looked after school creates more pride in students.”

Resilient Schools

1. Spontaneity and curiosity
2. Degree of independence that allows people to be acknowledged while being different
3. Clear organisational & decision making structure
4. Teach the skills of Self-esteem
5. Know how to Argue
6. Maintain rituals
7. Able to perceive the world very clearly - no scapegoating
8. High level of emotional support
9. Take time out to plan, prevent & predict
10. Staff are reliably unpredictable

Other factors may include:

- Positive school culture
- High expectations
- Involvement of parents
- Staff resilience
- Promotion of pro-social behaviours

What Students Don’t Like About School

The main inhibitor of school connectedness appears to be authoritarian behaviour by teachers and in some cases by other students. Many students mentioned the punitive and boring nature of their schools. Lack of choice over subjects, homework hours and workload contributes to resentfulness in some students.

“Most students really want to do well - I wish teachers (more of them) would believe it”.

Schools and Resilience

The Resilience Project

The focus group from Coomosira Secondary College

1998

What Students Don’t Like About School

The main inhibitor of school connectedness appears to be authoritarian behaviour by teachers and in some cases by other students. Many students mentioned the punitive and boring nature of their schools. Lack of choice over subjects, homework hours and workload contributes to resentfulness in some students.

“Most students really want to do well - I wish teachers (more of them) would believe it”.

The power of schools to either promote or inhibit young people’s self-esteem was a common theme in many focus group discussions.

Some felt that it was unrealistic to expect that schools can promote well-being. “School says it is here to help, but they can’t. They can’t be there for 1100 people”

Others mentioned the power of programs such as peer support, “our peer support time made me see how much the little kids liked having us spend time with them. I guess we can do for them what our teachers can do for us, the age difference doesn’t really matter then.”

A common theme was the need for balance, “if you’ve got one thing in school and one thing out of school then you’ve got something to live for”.

The focus group from Minboo North Secondary College