

Building resiliency skills in youth: How libraries can make a difference

By Jen Hill

Introduction

How do young people cope with serious problems or traumatizing events in their lives? Why do some individuals seem to be able to cope better in the face of adversity?

Resilience is a concept explaining an individual's capacity to maintain psychological and/or physical well-being in the face of challenging situations and to buffer the negative impacts of their situation (Rosenberg, et al., 2015). Being resilient does not mean never experiencing difficulties or distress (American Psychological Association (APA), 2017). It means being able to cope with situations, reducing long-term difficulties. Resilience leads to improved long-term mental health outcomes (Rosenberg, et al., 2015). Particular challenges that can emerge in adolescent years are potential for substance abuse, problematic intimate relationships and difficulties in transitioning to adulthood (Forrest-Bank, Nicotera, Anthony, & Jenson, 2015).

The good news is that skills that build resilience can be taught and learned (APA, 2017). For library staff working with youth, working on activities that help build resilience skills is a concrete way to help teens cope with situations that are complex and far beyond a library's ability to change, such as poverty and family difficulties.

Promoting resiliency

Factors associated with resilience are having caring and supportive relationships, the ability to make realistic plans and carry them out, having a positive self-image and confidence in abilities, having communication and problem-solving skills and having the ability to manage strong feelings and impulses (APA, 2017). These factors are quite similar to the Search Institute's well-known 40 Developmental Assets for adolescents (Brautigam, 2008). Specifically, the Developmental Assets include having positive family relationships or caring relationships with other adults, having positive role models, teens being valued and given a role in the community, having the ability to practice creative skills, taking personal responsibility, having planning and decision-making skills, having inter-personal skills, self-esteem and a sense of purpose (Brautigam, 2008). Possessing more or most of the Developmental Assets provides support for a young person and reduces his or her risk of dropping out of school or engaging in violent or anti-social behaviour. For this reason,



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the Search Institute argues in favour of purposely building these assets in young people's lives (Brautigam, 2008).

Specific teachable skills that build resilience can include stress management skills, goal-setting and problem solving skills, the ability to identify positive aspects of stressful situations and the ability to find meaning in one's life or situation (Rosenberg, et al., 2015). They can also include learning to build connections with others, learning to avoid seeing crises as insurmountable problems and keep things in perspective, learning to taking care of oneself, paying attention to feelings, accepting change and learning to maintain a hopeful outlook (APA, 2017). Some people find writing or stress-reducing practices like meditation or spiritual practices helpful (APA, 2017).

Teens from disadvantaged backgrounds or marginalized racial and ethnic backgrounds can face especially difficult experiences (Forrest-Bank, Nicotera, Anthony, & Jenson, 2015). They may particularly benefit from experiences that build resiliency skills. Some youth display resilience by avoiding negative paths and behaviours despite exposure to negative influences and traumatic events (Forrest-Bank, Nicotera, Anthony, & Jenson, 2015). Certain challenging situations such as having to care for siblings or ailing parents from an early age can potentially build resiliency themselves if through then a teen gains assets such as a sense of accomplishment and making a contribution to others (Forrest-Bank, Nicotera, Anthony, & Jenson, 2015).

How libraries can help

Libraries have the ability to offer many opportunities for activities that build resilience in teens. Involvement in library programs brings teens in contact with adults who can act as positive role models. It also provides opportunities to interact with people of different ages and from different backgrounds. Programs involving working in groups can help build problem-solving and interpersonal skills. Libraries also offer teens opportunities to build creative skills or get help with academic skills, potentially improving their self-esteem. Libraries could specifically offer workshops on stress management, time-management and goal-setting to help teens realize these are specific skills that can be built. Workshops that help reduce stress such as adult colouring, meditation and yoga could also be offered, with explanations of the importance of recognizing and managing stress.

A particularly good way for libraries to build resilience skills in teens is by providing opportunities for them to volunteer and therefore contribute to society (Forrest-Bank, Nicotera, Anthony, & Jenson, 2015). Volunteering helps teens to practice skills, and build a sense of accomplishment and personal responsibility. Positions where they help others, such as working with children or providing technology help to seniors, build skills in relating to others, managing emotions, empathy and problem solving. Helping others is known to increase self-worth and self-esteem. Volunteer positions that give teens leadership positions also build teamwork, planning, goal-setting and decision-making skills. Positions that give teens an opportunity to build a sense of political advocacy could be especially valuable, particularly for

teens who may experience marginalization (Forrest-Bank, Nicotera, Anthony, & Jenson, 2015). Opportunities to volunteer or get involved in projects at the library are extremely valuable opportunities for all teens. It would be beneficial to take proactive steps to ensure that less-advantaged teens also receive these opportunities. Brautigam states that libraries are in an excellent position to help teens build Developmental Assets, including interacting with adult role models, finding empowerment through volunteering, interacting with different types of people, and getting help with reading and schoolwork (2008).

Conclusion

Working in a community-oriented library can have difficult moments for library staff if community members face various challenges. Working with teens to build resiliency skills is a concrete way for library staff to help and hopefully bring about incremental change. Interacting with teens in meaningful activities can be truly enjoyable and build positive memories for all involved. Additionally, feeling that they are contributing towards positive outcomes for teens can build job satisfaction and resiliency skills in library staff members, building a positive circle of resiliency for communities. This type of positive teen programming can build long-lasting benefits and relationships, becoming extremely worthwhile for libraries.

References

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