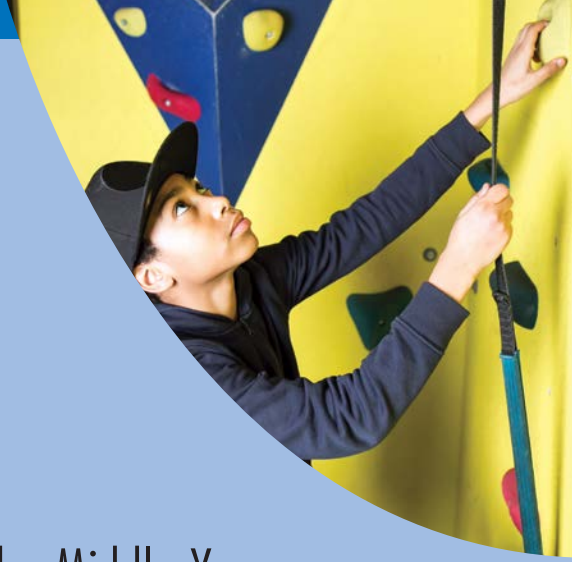


2018

# Think, Feel, Act

Empowering Children in the Middle Years



## Strengthening Children's Resilience and Mental Health

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### Introduction

The purpose of this brief is to provide helpful strategies to build children's resilience and well-being. While the brief focuses on child-centred strategies, resilience must also be considered within the context of intersecting external factors. Intervention and prevention mechanisms need to address family, community, and broader social, economic, cultural, and institutional factors.

### What Is Resilience?

Children who are **resilient** have the emotional, social, and behavioural skills to successfully navigate life's challenges. Resilient children face hardships courageously and may even thrive when confronted with difficulties.

## Why Is Resilience Important?

Mental health can be understood as a continuum along which people may move, influenced by multiple interrelated factors. Providing constructive supports for resilience helps children learn skills for coping that can contribute to lifelong mental health and well-being. In Ontario, up to 21 per cent of children and youth – or approximately 650,000 – experience mental illness (Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth for Ontario, 2015). The Mental Health Commission of Canada (2012) strongly recommends resilience-based prevention approaches for children, carried out in schools, after-school programs, and other organizations that children frequently attend.

## Resilience and Meaning Mindsets

Organizations and individuals can **support and build resilience** in children by helping them cultivate a **meaning mindset**. For children, meaning can be found in the following thoughts and behaviours (Armstrong, in press; Armstrong, 2016; Armstrong & Manion, 2015; Frankl, 1986; Wong & Wong, 2012):

- believing in their own ability and skills to challenge unhelpful thoughts, problem solve, and take a healthy, realistic stance toward challenges
- in the face of difficult feelings, taking helpful action to feel less sad, angry, or scared
- helping others, volunteering, and giving to or creating something for others
- developing and maintaining positive social connections (e.g., secure, supportive relationships with adults and peers), and feeling valued by others
- being regularly involved in valued activities (e.g., sports, music, or other extracurricular activities) that they look forward to, would have difficulty giving up, and perceive as “fun”
- having curiosity, and openness to learning and other new experiences
- experiencing meaningful moments (e.g., experiencing nature, being excited by learning, noticing everyday joys)
- expressing gratitude or appreciation in everyday experiences
- maintaining hope, even in the face of difficulties



To help build resilience in children, it can be a good exercise for educators to reflect with children and families on some of the ways that children find meaning, as listed above, and then identify specific ways to cultivate meaning mindsets.

## Strengthening Meaning Mindsets

In a study of over 100 children, aged 6 to 12, from Eastern Ontario and Quebec, our research team found that having a meaning mindset predicted good mental health (e.g., fewer reported symptoms of depression, anxiety, obsessions, and behavioural concerns) (St. John & Armstrong, submitted; St. John, 2017). With children aged 9 to 12, we developed a group-based educational intervention that uses original music and hands-on activities to teach meaning mindset skills for resilience (Armstrong, in press). In our pilot research, the program significantly enhanced both meaning mindset and mental health in the participants, compared with a control group (Armstrong, in press).

Cultivating a **meaning mindset** fits well with the Ministry of Education's *How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years* (2014). More specifically, cultivating such a mindset involves creating programs that are based on a view of children as competent, capable, curious, and rich in potential, and focusing on the following four foundations for learning:

- 1) **belonging:** connecting with others, feeling valued by others, forming relationships, contributing to the community or to a group, connecting to the natural world
- 2) **well-being:** maintaining physical and mental health through self-care, sense of self, and self-regulation skills
- 3) **engagement:** being involved and focused, curious, and open, thereby developing problem-solving and creative-thinking skills
- 4) **expression or communication:** communicating and listening to others, developing the ability to convey information, ideas, and feelings through bodies, words, or materials

# Strategies for Strengthening Resilience in Everyday Life

Below are several strategies, grounded in current literature and our research findings, that organizations could use to enhance children’s resilience and mental health:

**1) Heathy thinking:** Existing programs, such as after-school programs, Boys and Girls Clubs, or other community services, can teach children about healthy thinking. More specifically, such programs can coach children about their “self-talk” – the many thoughts going on in a person’s mind all the time. Most self-talk is reasonable or helpful, but some can be negative, unhelpful, or unrealistic.

Negative thoughts are those that make feelings like sadness, fear, or anger build. The thoughts that cause negative feelings may also cause problematic behaviours, such as avoidance, giving up, refusal, meltdowns, aggression, poor performance, or other undesirable responses.

Negative thoughts are generally “musts”, “can’t dos”, “shoulds”, or “awfulizing thoughts” and can include the following:

- **Worry:** Expecting something bad, such as danger or embarrassment, **must** be going to happen when the likelihood of this is unrealistic:
  - “They must be saying something bad about me.”
  - “I might make a mistake and people will laugh at me.”
  - “Something bad is going to happen to me.”

## **Combat worry with more realistic thinking:**

“What is the worst thing that could happen? What is the likelihood that would happen? If my friend said this to me, what would I say to my friend?”

- **Self-defeating talk:** Inner self-talk that highlights weaknesses and perceived defects (can’t dos), rather than strengths; a critical inner voice that loves to compare oneself to others and notice one’s shortcomings:
  - “I’m so stupid.”
  - “I can’t do anything right.”
  - “Other kids are so much better than me at this.”
  - “I didn’t play well. I’m useless.”

### Combat negative, “can’t do” thinking with “can”:

“Have there been times when I have been good at this? What are some things that I am good at? What things do I like about me?”

- **Perfectionism:** Perfectionistic thoughts are also self-critical. The focus of perfectionistic thoughts, though, tends to be on performance failure, imperfections, or mistakes. Children may think that they or others **should** be perfect and that the consequences of perceived mistakes are more terrible or awful than they will actually be. Children who have perfectionistic thoughts may have meltdowns if things do not go right or may refuse to try things if they are worried about making mistakes:
  - “I don’t want to try that because it won’t go right.”
  - “It wasn’t right. I have to redo it.”

### Combat perfectionistic self-talk with more practical thinking:

“Difficult things take practice. I will do well if I work hard. Nobody’s perfect. What did I do well this time? What could I do better next time?”

- **Hopelessness:** Expecting that things will never get better or change, that no matter what they do things will be awful or terrible:
  - “Bad things always happen to me.”
  - “No one understands me.”
  - “I can’t take it anymore.”

### Counter hopeless thinking with helpful, more realistic thoughts:

“What would I say to help another child if they said this to me? Is this always true, or are there times when this is not true?”





Feelings that result from negative thinking are “alarm bells” to indicate something is happening and that action should be taken. The process of **recognizing feelings** presents an opportunity to choose thoughts and behaviours that can be more helpful. Adults can help children recognize and express their feelings in ways such as the following:

- In everyday routines, when children are calm, adults can speak to them one-on-one about a time in the day when they seemed sad, angry, or scared. Label the feeling and clarify whether it is what they felt at the time. Labelling the feeling enhances emotional literacy (feeling awareness) and makes children more aware of these feelings in the future. Recognizing their alarm bells gives them a chance to tune in to their thoughts.
- When reading books to a group of children, highlight the feelings that the characters are expressing and ask the children what the characters did to feel better.
- Tell a story, such as this one, for example:
  - Imagine that two children, Kerry and Sani, were both interested in the lead role in a play in an after-school program. Neither is picked for the role. Their friend Ali ended up in the lead role, while Kerry and Sani both got non-speaking parts in the play. Kerry thought, “This is terrible. I must be bad at acting. I never want to be in a play again.” Sani thought, “I’m disappointed that I wasn’t picked, but it’s nice that my friend Ali was picked. I guess this means I’ll have more time for playing with my friends after school since I won’t have to memorize lines!” Kerry had a negative thought about the situation, while Sani had a helpful thought. In every situation, children can have different thoughts that lead to different feelings. People will feel bad if they’re having negative thoughts and could feel a bit better if they are able to look at the situation in a different way. Also, teaching that two people can think and feel differently in the same situation builds social skills, such as being able to see the world from another person’s point of view.

**2) Healthy behavioural tools.** Have a group of children come up with a list of brief, fun activities that they feel good doing (e.g., listening to music, kicking a ball, talking to a friend, writing a story, doodling, using a fidget toy). When they are feeling sad, angry, scared, or overwhelmed, they can use one of the feel-good activities to help themselves calm down or feel somewhat better.



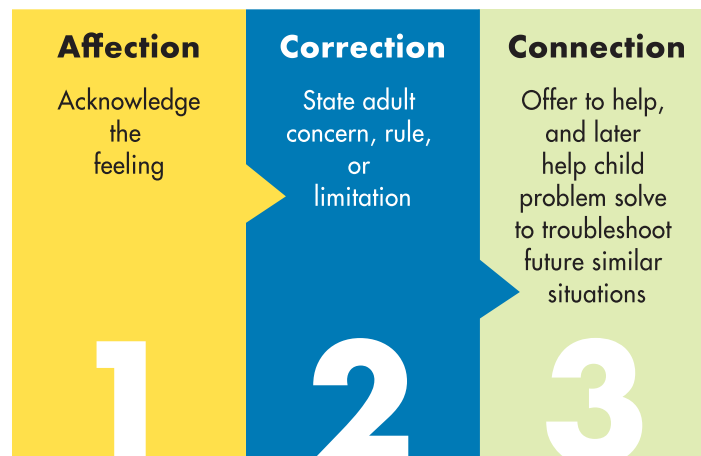
Such activities are not meant as an avoidance of challenging feelings, but rather as a way to calm down a little bit in order to be able to think or problem solve in a more helpful way. When having distressing emotions, children find thinking clearly difficult. If you found your toes at the edge of cliff, could you focus on what you were thinking about? You'd need to step back from the edge of the cliff to move from survival brain to thinking brain.

In everyday routines, having a list of feel-good activities may be helpful so that adults can gently remind children what they can try to do as negative feelings start to occur. Also, getting to know common predictable triggers for a specific child (e.g., transitions, challenging work, obsessions, frustration), and helping the child use calming strategies when in situations that trigger unhelpful behaviours or feelings, may minimize the chance that the feelings or behaviours get more intense (Green & Ablon, 2006).

**3) “Me to we” environment.** Community organizations, after-school programs, schools, and other programs that children attend can work to foster a “me to we” environment in their everyday activities. More specifically, creating or doing something for others helps to build a sense of meaning (Frankl, 1986). Therefore, creating an environment where children are regularly involved in giving to or helping others – that is, in meaning building – can potentially build their resilience to mental health issues. Furthermore, working together toward a common goal and in shared activities also helps to build peer connections.

**4) Warm, supportive environment: Affection before correction and connection.** Think of moods as being like a traffic light: moods can fall under the categories of “green” (calm, peaceful, relaxed, neutral), “yellow” (a bit nervous, disappointed, agitated, frustrated), and “red” (angry, fearful, highly distressed, expressively sad). Addressing situations in which children are in yellow or red moods is challenging, because in such situations children do not process information in the brain as well as they do when they are calmer. It is still possible, however, to connect with a child who is feeling strong emotions. When a child is in a yellow or red mood, to address a concern in the moment, parents, teachers, or activity leaders can comment on the feeling – label it (e.g., “You’re feeling sad that the boys didn’t pass you the ball”) and acknowledge the difficulty so that the child feels understood (e.g., “It’s hard to be left out”). This shows warmth and affection, making the child feel valued. “Feeling” language also helps build longer-term self-regulation skills, and makes the child feel heard and understood. Even in frustrating situations, the feeling can be acknowledged first (“You’re feeling angry”). Following this, more positive behaviours can be encouraged by stating the adult’s concern

“I understand you’re frustrated that you made a mistake in your work, but it’s not okay to leave the room”). Follow this with an offer to help (e.g., “Would you like me to help you figure out what was tricky for you?”), which can lead the child to feel supported and build a positive relationship with the supportive adult (see Figure 1). Later, when the child is calm, problem solving for such situations in the future may be helpful (e.g., “Next time you’re frustrated with your school work, instead of leaving the room, is there something else that you could try instead?”).



**Figure 1.** Affection, Correction, Connection

- 5) **Culture of engagement.** As meaningful extracurricular engagement is associated with well-being (Armstrong & Manion, 2015), creating an environment that provides many opportunities for child involvement in regular activities may be helpful. Finding out children’s specific interests may help in directing them to activities that may be a good fit for them. Simply involving a child in any activity is not associated with meaning and well-being. Children have to be engaged in something that they find fun and look forward to for it to be meaningful and promote mental health.
- 6) **Openness.** Community organizations, clubs, and other environments can build an openness to learning, involvement in activities, and new experiences by praising effort rather than intelligence or some fixed, unchangeable quality (Dweck, 2007). “Fixed mindsets” in relation to any activity are predictive of fear of failure and reluctance to put in effort (Dweck, 2007). Instead of saying “You’re such a good dancer” or “You’re so smart”, try “You worked really hard to do well at that” or “You must have practised really hard to do so well in that math contest.” In circumstances of praise and celebration, there may also



be opportunities to enhance a child’s self-analysis skills and problem-solving abilities. More specifically, to further reduce the potential for perfectionism and fear of failure, an adult activity leader or parent can say to a child, “What were you really proud of when you did X?” and “What would you do differently next time if you could change anything?”

**7) Gratitude (appreciating the moment).** Sometimes modern-day life is fast paced, and enjoying the moment may be challenging for children. After children have participated in an enjoyable activity (e.g., walking in nature, drawing pictures, playing a game) or while engaging in the activity, ask them what they like or liked about the activity. Noticing what they appreciate as it happens or after it happens may create in children an attitude of gratitude toward life experiences.

## Conclusion

Building resilience in children to support their mental health can happen in the home and the community. Environments that foster a **meaning mindset** – that promote healthy thinking and behaviour, problem solving, helping or giving to others, meaningful extracurricular engagement, social connection, skills to build openness to experiences, and gratitude – enhance resilience in children.

## Questions for Reflection

On your own or with others, use these questions as a starting point for thinking about your everyday experiences and practices:

- How well does my environment currently cultivate in children a meaning mindset – helping them learn to choose healthy thinking and actions in the face of challenges, encouraging them to give to others, fostering gratitude, engaging them in personally valued activities, and supporting them as they build and maintain positive relationships with others?
- In my environment, what are the gaps in cultivating a meaning mindset?
  - What can I do to support children in developing healthy thinking?
  - In what ways can I better use “feeling” language in everyday activities or in providing feedback about children’s behaviour?
  - How can I better develop in children an attitude of giving to others in everyday activities?

- In what ways could I better praise successes to reward effort rather than an innate quality? What am I currently saying to children when they succeed at an activity? How do I respond to failure?
- How can we practise gratitude on a daily basis so that it becomes part of the everyday routine?
- In what ways could my organization communicate resilience-based strategies to parents so that skills children learn outside of the home can also be developed within the home?

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Dr. Laura Armstrong is an assistant professor, clinical psychologist, and researcher in the School of Counselling, Psychotherapy, and Spirituality at Saint Paul University in Ottawa. She also holds Diplomate Clinician certification in Logotherapy, from the Viktor Frankl Institute of Logotherapy. She has developed a mental health promotion program for schoolchildren called D.R.E.A.M. (Developing Resilience through Emotions, Attitudes, and Meaning). In partnership with the Association for Bright Children (Ottawa chapter), she has also adapted this program for gifted and bright children in order to address the unique emotional, sensory, imaginal, and social challenges they sometimes face, which can act as barriers to academic success and positive well-being. In addition, Dr. Armstrong delivers invited public presentations on how to enhance community mental health, and she works clinically with children, youth, and adults.

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