



TRANSCRIPT

Six Strategies for Building Student Resilience: Excerpts from the Keynote Presentation at the 2019 Central Valley Convening on Trauma, Resilience, and the Power of Relationships

NARRATOR

At a convening in California's Central Valley, educators and health and mental health practitioners gathered to learn about how trauma can impact students' health, learning, and behavior and to hear local practitioners and national experts share actionable strategies for building positive relationships and resilience.

Dr. Flojaune Cofer described key actions in six areas that adults can use to address trauma and promote resilience. She started her presentation by challenging participants to reframe their thinking about perceived negative behaviors and intentions of students and their families.

DR. COFER

The first thing we need to change is our mindset about the work that we're doing. We need to assume positive intent. What if we were to start at the beginning of every engagement with the idea that students want to learn and that parents want their children to be successful. What if we just started there? What if we took off the table all the negative stereotypes and negative judgments that we make about families and we just started with those two as our basic premise? And then we were able to think about the fact that sometimes our behavior doesn't always align with our intent.

NARRATOR

Dr. Cofer discussed actions in six areas that are key for building resilience in youth: health, vision, collaboration, tenacity, composure, and reasoning.

DR. COFER

So the first one I want to focus on is health. Meeting our basic needs is incredibly important and it's something that we overlook. So we need to be able to have adequate rest. And so what we can survive on and what we actually need to be able to function are two very different things. The same is true for our food, for water.

And while we can't provide housing necessarily for someone and we can't change what their other conditions are, we can make the places that we are places that are at least providing for those needs where possible. And that means possibly setting aside a place to rest in your room, depending on what the setup is. That means having snacks available. That means trying to think about the things that people may need and have them available to you.

The second one is thinking about vision. There is this need to be able to have a clear expectation for what's going to happen, and there is comfort and safety in knowing that something can be relied upon, that there are structures and routines because that disruption that happens with trauma violates that, and we're looking for routines everywhere.

And so, when we find them, that can be a way of feeling safe. And so, what part of that means is that we should set expectations, we should develop ground rules, and we should establish routines. And often when we co-create those at the beginning of a relationship, then we can go back and we can honor them and we can say, "Well, remember we committed to..." right? It requires a recommitment instead of a re-establishment in the middle because something has already gone off the rails.

It also means that we're making the implicit explicit. It means that for people who maybe have never engaged in this way, they're coming in knowing what's expected of them, which helps you to be able to succeed.

And then there's collaboration. So establishing support networks can be incredibly important for students. When we think about what people need, we need to recognize that some of that is building in some support for the things that are happening in people's lives that we often ignore or pretend aren't happening.

Many of our students have parents who may be struggling with mental illness or addiction. Sesame Street just debuted a new character whose parents are struggling with addiction. Think about what that means for all the kids out there who are like, "That's me. I'm seen. Somebody else understands what I'm going through."

I often focus a lot on students who are experiencing foster care placement. And so, having that consistency and connectivity when they may be jumping from home to home is even more important. And so, making sure that we're tracking those students, making sure that if they move to a new home that's farther away, that their transportation is set up because they're entitled to stay at their school, provided that it's within a certain geographic region and so that they're able to continue going to school so that they don't lose all of their social ties.

So this, being able to establish a support network wherever you are, is so incredibly important to making sure that students feel connected and that young people feel heard and seen and less isolated.

Tenacity. So when we think about realistic optimism and bounce-back, part of that is that connection that we just talked about. And so, part of what we can do in many settings is, when we're first establishing that relationship, asking them if there are people in their lives that they trust. Many times, people already have someone and sometimes it can be helpful to understand what it is about that relationship that is meaningful to them.

It can a) be helpful in terms of establishing rapport with them and figuring out, learning more about them as a person. But it also means that sometimes you can prime someone for future contact if you need a way not to have to engage in a punitive or disciplinary action, but you're just trying to bring them back because they've had a hard day.

Then, of course, there is the composure. There's the calm and control that is certainly necessary. The ability to self-soothe and also the ability to restore after something has happened.

The truth is, we find the most safety in the places where...that are restorative in nature and where the expectations are explicitly stated. And so, restorative discipline is a partnership. It basically means that we are placing a value in nurturing, in encouragement, in expectations, in limits, and in accountability. It requires a relationship. It means that we are engaging in this together from the beginning.

And it also means the inappropriate behaviors have to have consequences, but that those consequences don't have to be traumatic in nature in order to be successful. And so being able to think about what is an appropriate response is helpful in terms of establishing that relationship.

There's the reasoning part, right? So when we've talked about managing conflict, when we've talked about what sometimes happens when things go off the rails, we need to be able to ask some questions and be able to problem solve. Because again, these are the skills that we use every day when we're negotiating relationships, when we're thinking about conflict, and when we're thinking about how to bring people back together. "What happened? How did it happen? What part did you play in it?" That's the accountability piece. "How were you affected by what you did? Who else was affected by what you did?" Right? That's the restorative piece of identifying who all was part of the group that was affected. "What do you need to do to make it right? And what can you do to repair harm?" Those are the questions that we engage in when we think about what comes next.

And so being able to walk through that process is incredibly helpful in terms of the social and emotional learning of our students. It's modeling for them healthy ways of managing conflict, healthy ways of engaging, and ways of being able to create a space that is loving and supportive and kind. The more of this we do, the better all of our systems will be in understanding and being compassionate and being healing to the things that are going on around us. So a lot of this is about changing what is normal.

So lastly, I leave you with what I consider to be our basic human understanding of continuous quality improvement, right? We don't need a really big and robust evaluation structure to happen. We just need to think about what are we currently doing that we should stop doing because it's harmful or it just doesn't work, right?

What haven't we done that we're going to start doing because it may work in whatever setting we're in, whether it's the classroom, an office, a home? What's something that we could begin to implement based on the things we've learned today, both in your workshops and from the plenary sessions that...there are some that...I could see myself doing that.

And then what... And this is probably the lion's share of the things that you're going to walk away with today—What are you already doing that is absolutely awesome? And now you walk away going, "I think I better understand why that works. I think that is one of, like, the elements of my model's fidelity of what somebody else would need to do to recreate this. And so I'm going to keep that going because that makes sense, because it's working."



And so it's constantly asking yourself these three questions and making them part of just the way that you operate.

NARRATOR

For more information on building resilience among youth and the importance of positive adult relationships, we invite you to explore these evidence-based resources or contact relwest@wested.org.