

Really surviving teaching: real resilience and passion

Maggie Dent



Maggie is an author, educator, and parenting and resilience specialist, with a particular interest in the early years and adolescence. Maggie is a passionate advocate for the healthy, commonsense raising of children in order to strengthen families and communities. She has a broad perspective and range of experience that shapes her work, a slightly irreverent sense of humour and a depth of knowledge based on modern research and ancient wisdom that she shares passionately in a commonsense way.

In humanistic psychology resilience refers to ‘an individual’s ability to thrive and fulfil potential despite or perhaps because of stressors or risk factors’.

— James Neill (2006)

More than ever before the teaching profession is experiencing complex change. Those in the early years are in the midst of the Early Years Learning Framework/National Quality Framework (EYLF/NQF) changes to ensure every child has the best possible start in life. Then there are the massive social and technological changes that are transforming the landscape of childhood and the very different parenting approaches that today’s children experience. Today’s children are more challenging and full of variety than previous generations.

The dynamics of processing complex and progressive change are very real. All change challenges our comfort zones.

It causes anxiety and fear. Rarely does a change in circumstances or experiences last very long. However, multiple changes multiply the effects of a single transitory event. The healthy resolution to change involves a re-working of beliefs, values and perceptions of the world and can take people many

months, sometimes years, to fully integrate. Often the sense of loss brings irrational grief and emotional instability. This can come from new curriculum, new forms of reporting or assessments, new leadership, new schools, different environments and then there are always new students.

Teachers are currently in a prolonged period of progressive change, which means that they cannot complete any level of change, before being swamped by another. This is a major cause of concern for staff health and wellbeing in the Western world.

The capacity to conquer the massive uncertainty and continual pressure to change, and to still enjoy this amazing profession, is what resilience is all about.

In my 2008 book, *Real Kids in an Unreal World*, I wrote of resilience:

Resilience refers to one’s ability to successfully manage one’s life and to successfully adapt to change and stressful events in healthy and constructive ways ... it is our survivability and ‘bounce-back-ability’ to the bumps and bruises of life.

Essentially, resilience is a balancing act between the stressors in your life, and the protective factors that counteract those stressors. This balancing act is complicated for teachers who have families, serious hobbies and sports, or who suffer any long-term illness.

The very nature of education, and especially schooling, is that it is organic and it ebbs and flows every day. Events happen in the communities outside schools that impact deeply at the grassroots of our relationships within the school. Human differences, dramas and crises occur not just daily, but sometimes minute-by-minute. No wonder teachers are dealing with stressful issues that they have no hope of being able to control. Knowing that the unexpected is often the normal will help you master the dance of being a teacher. Sometimes you will be in step with your colleagues, but not your students, and at other times it will be the parents' toes you may be stepping on – unintentionally of course.

So what helps build your resilience muscles and your coping skills so you can conquer this dance?

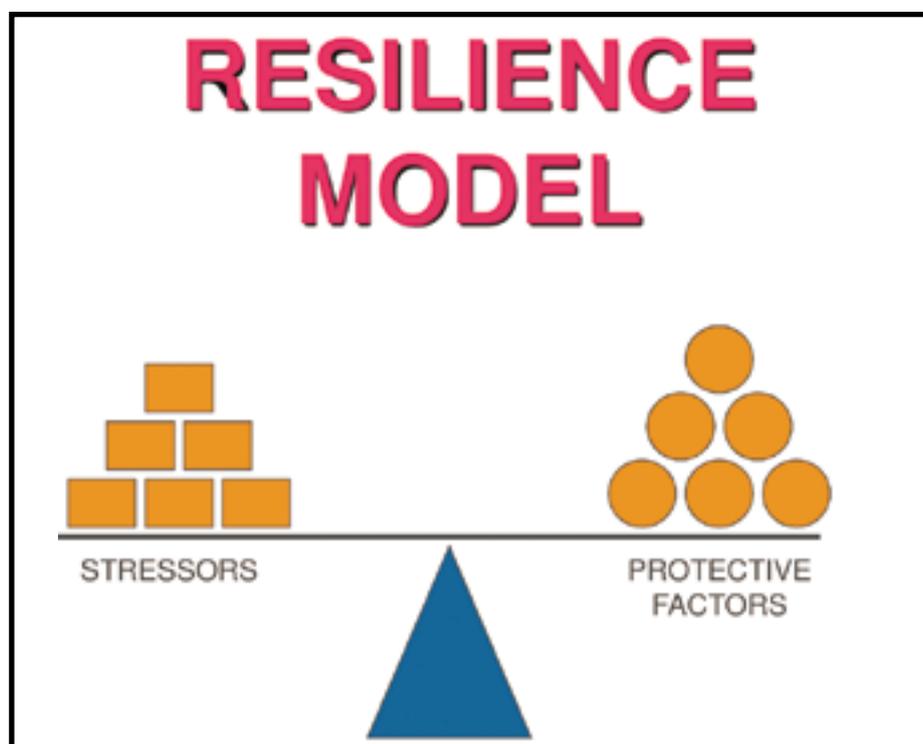
Step 1: Develop positive friendships and relationships within your work environment.

We all need allies in life and reciprocal life-affirming relationships in our work environments are enormously valuable in lifting our coping skills. This is really important in an environment of change, which makes everyone feel 'uneasy' or stressed. The work climate or culture is another factor that can help or hinder individual resilience.

Step 2: Humans can manage stressful times. However, research has shown that there is a 'tipping point' when things fall apart. This is called burnout. Many people ignore their warning signs and this is when burnout can suddenly knock you flat. Keep an eye on yourself for the warning signs that your body gives you when you are skating on thin ice. There are many signs that we sometimes ignore that show we are simply too stressed and tired for our own health and wellbeing. A few signs include:

- poor sleep patterns
- overeating or not eating
- short-temperedness and impatience
- memory loss and forgetfulness.

Identify what your three main warning signs are.



Source: Dent, M (2008) *Real Kids in an Unreal World*, Pennington Publications: Murwillumbah.

This is just a short list but when you notice your warning signs you need to then TAKE ACTION. This means you need to accept responsibility to take some steps to re-fill your cup, to take action to nurture yourself. The world will not go into a holding pattern if you step back to do this – it may only take a weekend in bed, a few small changes to your busy life and before you know it, you will bounce back. This can feel almost impossible for

many working with children in the early years because there are no relief staff available. Family day carers know how difficult this is for sure but it is critical.

Step 3: When you notice that your warning signs are present, it is time to take action. Resolving conflict and taking time to professionally reflect on the biggest stressors that are happening in your working world, and then taking some action, is the best way to avoid burnout. The second part is to re-fill your own cup – check out the list below and take some more action. This is improving the protective factors in your life that reduce the cortisol in the brain and to trigger ‘feel good endorphins’. Some examples are:

- spend time with a beloved pet
- get a massage or other form of professional nurturing
- catch up on sleep
- play favourite music
- spend weekend resting
- meditate.

Step 4: Physical care – Ensure you are eating well, and avoiding too much over-indulgence of any kind – eating well means as fresh as possible, rather than as much as possible! The body needs good fuel to keep energy levels up. Exercise does help reduce stress and it makes your brain work better (Medina, 2009). It also improves your moods.

Step 5: Build more strategies to manage stress. Learning calming techniques that soothe the vagus nerve in the brain is important and can be done with the children you teach. Other things that can help:

- maintain sense of humour
- positive reflective practice
- develop healthy detachment
- believe in the significance of teaching as a privilege not a chore.

Step 6: Ensure you have healthy boundaries. Avoid allowing work to intrude too much at home and give yourself permission to have free nights during the week when work stays at work. This also means managing the ‘big change’ in small chunks. Many staff feel overwhelmed with too much that needs to be done. Taking the process one step at a time helps reduce the angst and stress levels.

Resilience means taking responsibility for one’s own mental, emotional and physical wellbeing while investing enormous energy in delivering great education and care to today’s interesting children.

Without a deep passion and commitment, and a healthy pattern of vigilance, even the best teachers can struggle to get out of bed some days.

Top five resilience tips

My final top tips for conquering the journey of being an educator long-term are:

- *Always keep some slack – avoid stretching yourself too thin*
- *Share the journey – never walk alone*
- *Fill your own cup – enjoy your life*
- *Lighten up – laughter lifts the spirit*
- *Keep a positive vision for a better way of being by laughing, loving and living well.*

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