

10 tips for promoting strength, resilience and perseverance among your students

By Jennifer LW Fink

1. Incorporate Kids' Passions into the Classroom

Truly resilient people are motivated by passion; their deep interest in a topic allows them to keep working even when things get tough. So take some time to identify your students' passions, and weave these into the curriculum whenever possible. Simple adaptations, like letting students write reports on topics of their own choosing or tweaking assignments to better mesh with their interests can make a big difference. Who says that you can't learn physics by studying football?

2. Tap into Students' Intrinsic Motivations

People work hard at things that matter to them. Figure out what motivates your students, keeping in mind that all students are different. For some kids, it's meaningful to help animals. For others, being part of a church or helping their sister may be meaningful. A student who is motivated by animal welfare will work long and hard on projects related to animals; a student who's concerned about the environment may want to design a top-notch recycling program for the school.

3. Build on Student Strengths

Much of the current educational system focuses on helping students improve their weaknesses. But teachers should also help students build on their strengths. It's important to help students find their strengths, and to use them in practice to make them stronger.

Find ways to nurture student strengths. A really good writer, for instance, may benefit from spending time with a mentor; perhaps you could arrange for her to work one-on-one with a local journalist or author.

4. Challenge to Create Excellence

Real growth happens when people work at the edge of their competence. Students who are not challenged lose out on the sense of confidence that comes from mastering a challenge, and they may come to believe that accomplishment should be effortless. It is mandatory that we give advanced students challenges all the time. Otherwise, there's the danger they'll conclude that being smart means 'I don't have to work hard'.

5. Teach a Growth Mind-Set

People who have a growth mind-set believe that their basic abilities can be developed through hard work; people with a fixed mind-set tend to believe that things like intelligence and talent are fixed qualities. Tell students that “every time you push out of your comfort zone to learn hard things, your brain grows new connections and you get smarter.”

Teaching a growth mind-set may improve kids’ behaviour, too. Research shows that some of the most apathetic, disengaged, and disruptive students ‘wake up’ when they’re taught a growth mind-set. It’s pretty hard for students to be apathetic about growing their brains.

6. Let Students Know that Learning Involves Struggle

Too many students equate struggle with stupidity; they think that feeling confused or overwhelmed during a lesson means that it’s over their heads. But confusion and struggle are a natural, and necessary, part of true learning, and learning to accept struggle as part of the process can help students stick with lessons when the going gets tough.

It may be helpful for students to know that frustration and anxiety, and also some amount of boredom and confusion, is normal when learning. Students need to know that they actually should not experience mastery all the time.

7. Promote Practice

Gritty people do more deliberate practice. They spend time working on really specific goals that are just outside of what they could do yesterday.

Many students find practice boring, though, so talking about the importance of practice may help your students. K. Anders Ericsson, a noted psychology researcher, has shown that the difference between good and great is deliberate practice. Emphasise to students that a great performer (whether it’s a soccer star, a musician, or a well-known actor) logs many more hours of effective practice than a merely good performer.

8. Grade for Effort, Persistence, and Focus

Grades that only reflect mastery of subject material may inadvertently reinforce a fixed mind-set. If a student is able to earn an A in your class without really trying, he has no incentive to push himself—and he is losing opportunities to grow. Similarly, a student who earns a C may have put forth all kinds of unrecognised effort.

Some schools have started incorporating growth mind-set characteristics into their grades. A quarter of the grade might be based on criteria such as, ‘Have you challenged yourself? Have you persisted when it was hard? Do you bounce back from setbacks? Do you help other kids learn?’ Those kinds of grades mean that kids who are working hard and improving get credit for that, and kids who coast can’t get an A.”

9. Praise Actions, Not Traits

Praising intelligence harms kids. It puts them into a fixed mind-set, and then they don't want to do anything hard, because they don't want to show that they're dumb.

Give praise for efforts, strategies, focus, and perseverance. This kind of praise focuses kids on the processes they engaged in to be successful. It also encourages the kinds of behaviour that are correlated with true success.

10. Model Positive Reactions to Setbacks and Mistakes

Great geniuses try and fail over and over again. But schools too often only reward success. Help your students see mistakes and setbacks as learning opportunities.

Teach kids that wrong answers and mistakes are informative. When a student gives a wrong answer, try saying, 'That's an interesting answer. I can see how you got there.'

Teachers should teach students that "what really matters is what you do after a failure, rather than the failure itself. Students need to know that it's entirely within their power to turn any individual failure around.