

## Fostering Resilience in Teens by David R. Parker, Ph.D.

When we overprotect teenagers - with the best of intentions - what happens when they grow up? In the 1980's, national studies produced some startling answers. Thousands of young adults who had been in special education were found, after high school, to be floundering. Few of them had jobs, most were still living at home, only a small percent had any degree of financial independence, and many felt powerless to shape their lives in meaningful ways. Interviews revealed a striking insight: these young people reported that teachers, parents, coaches, and others had steered them away from challenges at which they might (*might*) fail to ensure they would experience as much success in high school as possible. While they expressed gratitude for the adults' good intentions, these young people realized that this approach robbed them of authentic life experiences that could teach them how to make decisions, learn from their mistakes, and become confident and independent adults. This research led to the [self-determination](#) movement, which is designed to help young people develop the ability to "identify and achieve goals based on a foundation of knowing and valuing themselves" (Field & Hoffman, 1994, p. 164).

Current trends facing high school students can take us back to the self-determination movement for a broader perspective. In the wake of recent teen suicides in Indianapolis, the community has been re-examining pressures on teenagers, their families, and schools to achieve. At what cost? And how do we identify and support those teenagers who are struggling to handle that pressure? We all want adolescents to receive a high-quality education, to have rewarding extracurricular options, and to develop the qualifications needed to pursue a meaningful college experience if they so desire. High schools are clearly succeeding at these endeavors. U.S. [college enrollment](#) increased by 11% between 1991 and 2001 and then 32% between 2001 and 2011.

At the same time, some are beginning to question if the culture of success is giving teens (and families) the wrong message. Listen to parents discuss the pressures involved in orchestrating increasingly elaborate birthday parties to get an idea of what this mindset feels like in elementary school. Struggles and even failures are a natural part of life. They can be powerful learning experiences that produce positive outcomes *depending on how we view them*. Are we losing the ability to promote **resilience** in our teenagers if we orchestrate their success at every opportunity? According to the American Psychological Association, "[resilience](#) is the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or significant sources of stress — such as family and relationship problems, serious health problems or workplace and financial stressors. It means 'bouncing back' from difficult experiences." Resilience is not a trait that people either have or do not have. It involves behaviors, thoughts and actions that can be learned and developed in anyone.

According to "[The Road to Resilience,](#)" a brochure published by the American Psychological Association, a combination of factors contributes to the ability to bounce back from life's challenges. Caring and supportive relationships, within and outside of a person's family, are the most important tool. These relationships need to be non-judgmental and unconditional, however, so that a person who is struggling can be honest about his/her negative feelings or circumstances. Other factors that promote resilience include the ability to make and carry

out realistic plans, having a positive view of one's strengths and abilities, effective communication and problem-solving skills, and the ability (with help, if needed) to manage strong feelings and impulses.

*Psychology Today* published an [article](#) by psychologist and attorney, John A. Call. Dr. Call talks about rough times and how people can survive - and develop resilience - after tragic events. His suggestions may have special poignancy to teenagers who have been affected by the recent suicides. Dr. Call encourages people to build relationships that can support them in tough times, whether with family, friends, community groups, or faith-based organizations. He encourages us to set small, daily goals that are realistic and achievable. "Ask yourself..." he writes, "'what can I do today to move in the direction I need to go?'" Dr. Call encourages us to notice how we have changed after a tragedy or crisis. He points out that many people feel more confidence and a deeper appreciation for life. He advises people to take extra care of their physical health in difficult times and to seek mental health care if current pressures become overwhelming.

My CRG colleagues and I have the tremendous privilege of working with youth with LD, ADHD, and related learning challenges, then watching these young people grow up. Many of these adolescents also struggle with depression, anxiety, or other mood disorders. I am constantly amazed by their resilience. It's as if academic or social challenges, early in life, give them meaningful opportunities to learn how to bounce back. Dr. Sam Goldstein, a psychologist who works with children with ADHD, gave a recent [TEDx Talk](#) called "The Power of Resilience." He describes the same phenomena and how parents, teachers, and other adults can help young people make life's challenges - which are a natural part of life - powerful opportunities for character development and personal growth. No one wants bad things to happen to good people. But we shouldn't define success as the absence of challenges or failures. What matters is how we respond when the going gets tough.