



Reclaiming Youth E-Newsletter

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Building Inner Resilience in Young People

by Linda Lantieri

Reclaiming Youth Board of Directors

As a caring adult in young people's lives, take a moment to think about one young person who is a part of your life today, and ask yourself what it is that you really want for him/her. A variety of answers will arise, depending on the particular needs, strengths, and challenges of the young person. However, whether or not this young person will be successful at realizing those hopes is dependent on whether or not s/he is equipped with the inner strength to approach the day-to-day challenges as well as the big challenges life may present. Is s/he capable of being resilient in the face of obstacles, as well as opportunities? Can s/he bounce back and even surpass a level of coping when the tests of life come?

Since September 11, 2001, I have been involved in equipping thousands of young people and adults in New York City with the skills and strategies to help them quiet their minds, calm their bodies, and identify and manage their emotions more effectively. As founder and director of *The Inner Resilience Program*, I have seen that the capacity to be more in control of one's thoughts, emotions, and physiology can form a sort of internal safety net that gives young people the inner preparedness they need to face the challenges and opportunities of life. It has also helped greatly in their recovery and healing process.

As the modern stresses of today's high-stakes environments accumulate in young people, it is our job to help them cultivate the habits of mind, body, and heart it will take to continually relieve the pressure. When young people don't have a reserve they can borrow from when they experience disturbing emotions, there is less attention available to them to actively engage in the learning process. Both young people and adults can benefit from learning some practical stress management techniques to strengthen the brain's circuits for managing distress and for paying attention.

One way to give young people a head start in strengthening the neural pathways of the brain is to equip them with some form of regular contemplative practice they could use to focus their minds and calm their bodies. Reflective moments are often missing in our busy, sometimes frenzied, lives. The more young people can begin to experience quiet and stillness, the more they can feel an inner balance and flow, which offsets the over-stimulation that is so abundant in most of our lives. This relaxed state of alertness also puts us in the optimal zone for learning. The benefits of such a regular practice of turning inward can include:

- Increased self-awareness and self-understanding
- Greater ability to relax the body and release physical tension
- Improved concentration and ability to pay attention
- The ability to deal with stressful situations more effectively by creating a more relaxed way of responding to stressors
- Greater control over one's thoughts, with less domination by unwelcome thoughts
- Greater opportunity for deeper communication and understanding between adults and young people, because thoughts and feelings are being shared on a regular basis

One way of welcoming a regular time of going within is to create a "peace corner." This is a special place set aside either in a home or a classroom where young people can go whenever they need calm and stillness in order to regain their inner balance and flow. It also could be used when anyone is feeling overwhelmed, stressed, angry, or otherwise out of control emotionally. You can include pictures or photos of peaceful places young people have been to, quiet music, and a developmentally appropriate CD such as the one included in the book *Building Emotional Intelligence* that includes a guided focusing and relaxation exercise for various age groups.

A window of opportunity exists right now in our society for these kinds of approaches to make their way into our homes and our schools. It is essential for young people to learn new ways to have their human spirits uplifted and their inner lives nourished as a normal, natural part of their growing-up experience. The Reclaiming Youth Network, along with many others, supports a vision of



education that cultivates young people's hearts and spirits along with their minds. And, as Gandhi has reminded us, "We have to start with the children."

***This article is adapted with permission from: *Building Emotional Intelligence: Techniques to Cultivate Inner Strength in Children* by Linda Lantieri, Sounds True, 2008.**

Biography

Linda Lantieri is Director of The Inner Resilience Program and current member of the Board of Directors of Reclaiming Youth International.

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